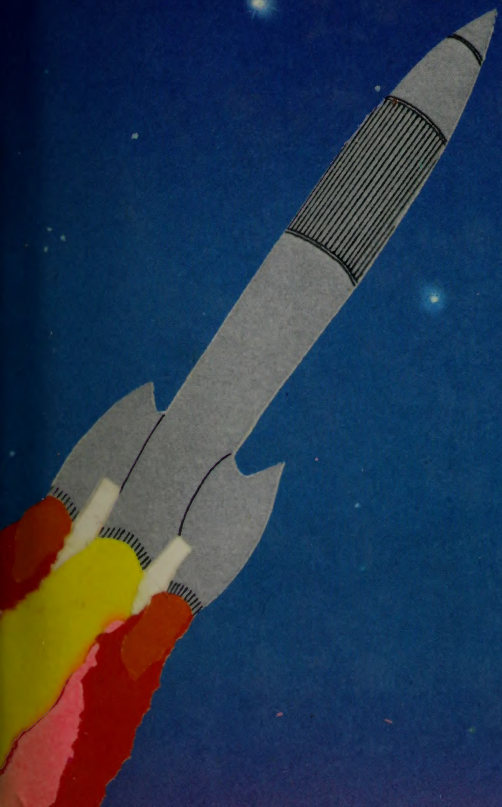
pulling through

a novel

Philip Slater



HOW I SAVED THE WORLD

Suppose you were given exclusive information about a secret plan for nuclear disaster. You might respond exactly as the two unlikely heroes of Philip Slater's first novel do—you'd try to save the world. For Grace Castleman and Taylor Bishop, it all started with that damned spider...

An innocent spider first puts dreamy, eccentric Taylor on the trail of a secret plot to bring nuclear destruction to a large American city. Thus aroused from his California languor, Taylor teams up with his friend Grace, a feminist anthropology professor and cynic extraordinaire, and travels from laid-back Las Lunas on a mad trip across America, following the trail of a sinister Defense Department project, the deadly "Donald Duck."

Along the way they gather a remarkable cast of oddballs. Louise, an off-the-wall Indian medicine woman, shows them how to work a "Gormanizer." Polly Morphus, a punk singer, comes along after narrowly escaping violent death while performing with her group, "Crushed Nuts." Bran, a professor of Russian, completes the core group—but the gang encounters many others: some deceivingly conventional suburban neighbors in Cambridge, Mass.; an ominous figure Grace calls "the Admirable Cretin";

(continued on back flap)

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HOW I SAVED THE WORLD

Also by Philip Slater

MICROCOSM
THE GLORY OF HERA
THE PURSUIT OF LONELINESS
EARTHWALK
FOOTHOLDS
THE WAYWARD GATE
WEALTH ADDICTION

HOW I SAVED THE WORLD

a
novel

Philip Slater

E. P. DUTTON
NEW YORK

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Prologue

I want to say right at the outset that I feel a little bit guilty about the title. *I* wanted to call it "How *We* Saved the World." Because it took a lot of people to do it—even Sneath was important in his own way—and actually I played a pretty small role. Most of the time I didn't even know what I was doing. But my publisher insisted that "I" made a better title. He said America is an individualistic society, especially these days, and "I" sells a whole lot better than "we." So that was that. Grace maintains that "I" is only a figure of speech anyway and that the individual as such doesn't exist. Which is something, coming from her.

Taylor Bishop

PART ONE
Jericho

In Which I Get Very Little Help from My Friends

IN A WAY my adventures began right after I got out of the hospital, when I went to a film about nuclear war. It wasn't my idea of a welcome-home party. I would have preferred seeing something nostalgic with Carole Lombard or Sydney Greenstreet at the theater where all the film buffs go: Young men with bulging glasses who twirl their hair between their fingers when they talk. But I don't like going to the movies alone and I didn't think sitting in a dark room with a lot of people twirling their hair would be good for me right then.

So I went to this nuclear film at the local community center with my friends Peter and Grace who are very political. They said they wanted to celebrate my return to normality by making me realize we were all in the same boat. The image made me recoil a little—boats full of people and all—but I went anyway because I wanted company.

The film was very disturbing. There were pictures of Hiroshima after the bomb fell, shots of hospital wards full of radiation victims, and speeches by some men who used to be mad scientists. Grace claims there's an organization called Scientists Anonymous where repentant scientists get together at night and smoke a lot of cigarettes and tell each other how they used to spend weeks at a time prowling around their laboratories—going without food, sleeping on the floor, letting their personal appearance deteriorate, destroying their bodies and their marriages. They especially like to testify that in the depth of their illness they would have murdered their loved ones for a Nobel Prize. And if a member is caught writing formulas on his sleeve they throw him right out of the meeting. At least that's what Grace says.

After the film a folksinger came on with a guitar and sang a little song about nuclear war:

Nuclear war
S'like wood alcohol
Gonna make you blind
Gonna kill y'all.

And then there was a discussion.

Everybody wanted to know what they could do. The woman who showed the film said that really everyone should do what they can do best. Which didn't help me much because the only thing I'm really superior at is cat's cradle and I couldn't see how that would help. Peter and Grace decided to do some organizing, but I said that wouldn't do for me since I can't even organize my own life. Grace said that didn't matter—that that's why people *did* organizing. I said that meeting new people right now would throw me into a funk. She said I had to start somewhere. I said you have to start at the beginning and not at the end, and she dropped it. It's one of the few arguments I've ever won with Grace.

I think I'm beginning to understand how Grace's mind works. At the meeting she was quite short with some people she called "trout radicals." She said they like to spend their time swimming upstream so they can have the security of staying in the same place and still

retain the illusion of movement. Or something like that. She said you have to use the energy of the stream itself to change its direction, but she didn't say how to go about it. Grace studies some kind of martial art and it influences the way she thinks about life.

It was Grace who suggested I write a letter. We were sitting at the Caffé Salieri late one afternoon a few days later and she was bored with me asking what I should do. Peter, grumbling behind his *Guardian,* said that any fool could write letters.

"Never mind," Grace said. "I'm trying to appeal to Taylor's modesty."

It was a delicate way to put it and she was right. It might be a dumb, pointless thing to do, but I wasn't feeling all that confident right then, and for someone just discharged from a mental hospital a small manageable task was very welcome.

I thought about it as we left the Salieri and rode up in the hills above Las Lunas to watch the sunset. Las Lunas, I suppose, is everyone's fantasy of what a laid-back coastal California town should be like. It has a population of about seventy thousand, a university, an electronics firm, a lot of fruit trees and artichokes, a Native American burial ground, and tourists. It has, per capita, more astrologers, real estate agents, chiropractors, espresso bars, movie theaters, and tarot decks than any place in America. It also has more unemployed artists, musicians, writers, craftspeople, actors, poets, dancers, and carpenters, and the only free soup kitchen I know of where there are two lines—one for vegetarians.

We drove up in Grace's 1969 Pontiac convertible, which Peter likes to call the Coupe de Grace. I brought some bread and Grace brought a bottle of red wine and some Brie. Peter brought some macadamia nuts, but he only let us have three apiece because he wanted to save them for the woman he was meeting later.

"These," he said, holding up the jar, "have unlocked many an armored heart."

"No woman who invites you to come for dinner and spend the night qualifies as an 'armored heart,'" Grace objected. "Cough up."

So Peter relented and gave us two more each.

"Look at those colors, Taylor!" Grace loved sunsets. "Think how lucky we are to be living in an age of decline!"

Which was a pretty thin piece of encouragement, but better than nothing.

When I got home that night I started right away trying to compose my letter to the Pentagon. It was harder than I thought. I had all the arguments in front of me but I didn't know what order to put them in. I got more and more discouraged, and after a while I found myself staring at a little seven-legged spider in a web between the TV and the wall—anything to avoid looking at that blank page with "Dear Sir" at the top. The spider kept trying to wrap a dying fly up for storage but every time she finished, it would sneak off and unravel itself. Then it would try to fly, but could only manage to heave itself out of the web and onto the floor beside the TV. The spider would then have to scuttle down and carry it up again—giving it a few more injections to keep it quiet—and the process would start all over.

I remembered the story of Robert de Bruce, the liberator of Scotland, who was heartened in a dark moment by the perseverance of a spider. Was this messy drama meant for me? Did it mean I should keep trying? Is a busy spider always an advertisement for perseverance? When I told Grace about it the next day she suggested that maybe the message was being conveyed by the fly, but fortunately I didn't think of that at the time. Because after watching the spider for an hour or so I found myself writing a passionate letter to the secretary of defense, which I finished in twenty minutes and mailed the next day without making a single alteration.

This incident was the beginning of a long and complex relationship between the spider and me. When I got home the next night, pleased with having achieved my modest goal, I looked for her again. She was building a web and still having trouble. Every time she started out with a new strand she'd see her reflection in the blank screen of the TV, get disoriented, and go back the way she came. Her whole web was just a mass of loops that dangled uselessly from her point of origin. I began to wonder about her. Was this the same species that had inspired Robert de Bruce? Had it been wise to seek inspiration from a creature too stupid to navigate across its own web? But the die was cast.

A few weeks later I received a reply to my letter.

Dear Mr. Bishop:

Thank you for your letter setting out the dangers of nuclear escalation. We here at the Pentagon are very much alive to the perils you have so eloquently described. We appreciate your concern, your anxiety, your sincere desire to dissuade our nation from a course that seems, as you put it, suicidal. But how do you think we feel? Shut up in a huge impersonal office all day with a noisy air conditioner, answering letters from people who think they know more than the Department of Defense. You talk about destroying the world—what about unemployment? I have a family to support just like you.

You claim that the USSR is more cautious than we are just because they lost twenty million people in World War II. But how many people in Russia remember that old stuff? Our thinking on this at DOD is a little more sophisticated. We take into account not only memory *but also* imagination, *in which we've got them beat hands down. Could a Russian have invented the electric can opener or liquid rust arrester? A few old Stalinists may remember the German invasion, but here we have a nation full of imaginative people visualizing a world gone mad with nuclear warheads flying about as thick as midges in a summer swamp and reducing the planet to a smoking, lifeless cinder. Remember, the Russians only think what they're told, whereas Americans think for themselves. And in case there are some Americans who* do *think what they're told, we tell them as little as possible, just to be on the safe side.*

You claim that we already have a larger nuclear arsenal than the Soviets, but this is not an easy thing to assess. There are many different types of warheads, many different kinds of delivery systems, and many different ways to defend against them. So you can see, Mr. Bishop, it isn't a simple matter. Perhaps I can illustrate the problem by drawing a little analogy:

Standing alone, before a mirror, a man might look at his penis and feel that it was quite handsome and more than adequate to do the job required of it. But let that same man stroll through a locker room and you'll see his attitude change. He compares himself with others, and begins to be aware of certain limitations. His may be of unusual length, but the man next to him will boast a greater thickness. He will naturally feel uneasy about this and at a disadvantage, and so will the other man. I hope this will make clear to you the

nature of the problem we're dealing with. We must strive at all times to be both longer and *thicker than our enemies. If you have further queries, please don't hesitate to write us here at DOD.*

Sincerely yours,
Lt. Col. Richard Mobey

The next day at the Salieri I showed the letter to Grace and Peter. Grace made a face.

"It's what I've always said: You'll never make a dent in this system until you get rid of all those necrophiliac political leaders. They've let their right brains atrophy so they're all lopsided. That's why they carry briefcases around all the time—to balance them. More weight on the light side, otherwise they'd fall over. In the old days they used holsters the same—"

Peter interrupted.

"I've just had a brilliant idea!" He paused for effect. "Right now both nations try to build up bigger defenses so that when they agree to disarm they'll have further to go. Right? The idea seems to be that if I throw away one missile, and then you throw away one missile, and then I do, and then you do, if I've been smart I end up with one and you end up with none. Then I can push you around. The problem is, nobody's dumb enough to be caught short. Obviously if you want to have a balance of power it's better to have more missiles than less, because it's easier to think you're equal. But you can't keep building more because it wrecks everybody's economy. So here's my plan: Barter!"

"Barter?"

"Instead of throwing the stuff away, you *trade*. I give you one of my missiles, you give me one of yours. When we've traded them all away we just trade them all back again. Then we never have to build any more. We're balanced and we're in a continual state of disarmament, yet at the same time we're building up our defenses!"

"It's inspired, Peter," Grace conceded unenthusiastically, "but it doesn't go to the heart of the matter, which is that world leaders are all power-hungry to begin with or they wouldn't be where they are, and they can't be expected to make peace because they're all too driven and competitive and paranoid. We need to find ways for heads of state to fight and compete and play chicken with each other without endangering the rest of us. In the Middle Ages they had

jousts and tournaments and spent their energy smashing each other up, so the peasants could go about their business and keep the world alive. . . . What is it, sweetheart?" (This to her daughter, Athene, who had been playing dolls with a friend on the other side of the Caffé veranda but was now pulling on her arm.)

"Linda says her mother's a *bicycle!*" Athene's five-year-old treble dripped with scorn.

"She means 'bisexual,' darling. Put your sweater on, it's getting cool."

Athene grumbled herself into her sweater and ran off, as Grace completed her thought: "What we need is the functional equivalent of a joust."

Peter suggested demolition derbies in helicopters over Greenland, but he thought some sort of prize would be needed. Grace said the most appealing prize for power-hungry men would be a woman who was completely accepting and nonthreatening, i.e., recently deceased.

After another round of cappuccinos the forces of evil were reeling and Peter and Grace were ready to call it a day. But I couldn't share in their enthusiasm. Their sardonic fantasies depressed me. I needed something to hold on to. Writing my own letter had made me feel a little better for a while and now I'd lost even that harmless illusion. When I got home I just sat for a long time staring at the blank screen of the unplugged TV and scratching my right eyebrow. (I have a chronic itch there. Grace says it comes from a repressed desire to be supercilious.) I hadn't moved for nearly an hour when I saw something that changed my life irrevocably.

The Oracle

I HADN'T SEEN the spider in three weeks—ever since the night when, in a fit of what seemed to me like acute embarrassment over her incorrigible clumsiness (Grace says I anthropomorphize too much), she had climbed through a crack and disappeared into the bowels of the TV. Now here she was again, after all this time, but so changed I wouldn't have believed it was the same spider except for the fact that she was still missing her four o'clock leg (the one just abaft of the beam on the starboard side). At one time I had thought this handicap was partly to blame for her awkwardness but now I realized just how wrong I was. This was a transformed spider. Without even pausing to adapt to the light she began immediately making a new web, and in less than an hour had constructed a masterpiece of symmetry and grace and caught two flies. When she had trussed up her second catch she looked me straight in the eye (or so it seemed to

me) and executed a little seven-legged dance. Had she been a bee (I read a book about bees once) I would have interpreted the dance as signifying that there was some very rich clover in a meadow some two thousand yards away in a north-northeasterly direction. Because that's the way bees communicate. They point in a certain direction and buzz and twitch a lot and waggle their ass in a circle, and how many times they waggle it tells you how far away the clover is. Or something like that.

Since the spider wasn't a bee, and since I knew for a fact that her dance, in bee language, would have pinpointed the city's sewage treatment plant, I was completely at a loss as to what she was trying to say. Was it mere arachnid exuberance? Congratulating herself on a job well done? In spite of Grace's warning, I couldn't rid myself of the feeling that the dance had been intended for me—that it was a communication of some kind. When I looked blank the spider went over and sat down meaningfully (*I* thought) on the TV dial. And when I still gaped vacantly at her, she shrugged (or something very much *like* a shrug—Grace had got me completely uptight about this whole thing), went back to her web, and fell asleep. Leaving me in a state of shock and confusion.

First of all I had to deal with the spider's transformation. What transcendent experience had she undergone in the recesses of the TV to change her from a disoriented klutz to what Las Lunians would call a "really together insect"? Who ever heard of getting therapy from a color TV? Second, what was she trying to tell me with her little *toggeltanz?* When I had looked to her for inspiration before, her bumblings had foretold my own. Did this mean I could now expect success in my future endeavors? But what was the message? Was her squatting on the TV dial a kind of instruction? Should I, too, seek enlightenment from the most stupefying of all forms of recreation?

It may seem like a strange thing to do, but since I'm a very intuitive person I turned the TV dial till it pointed in a north-northeasterly direction (which proved to be Channel 3) and plugged it in. But what in a TV would correspond to two thousand yards? It occurred to me that spiders are weavers and weaving has always been a symbol of the passage of time. But how long was a yard in time? What was she using for a unit?

My course seemed clear: I had been directed to Channel 3; since I

didn't know exactly when I should tune in, all I could do was watch continuously and hope for the best. After all, it had taken the spider a month to become enlightened. Why should I expect better? (I was perfectly aware that what I was doing would be considered clinically bananas by any of the people credentialed to make such judgments, but they weren't around and it was the only lead I had.)

I'm glad it didn't take me as long as the spider because after two days in front of the set the images were blurring and the voices all sounded like chipmunks. I found myself focusing on extraneous details and even hallucinating. The plots blended into one another: I could no longer tell, when police kicked their way into an apartment, whether it was the climax of a crime drama, which would therefore end in the hero beating up a black drug dealer, or the opening of a sitcom episode, which meant that the goofiest-looking policeman would fall in love with the irate woman whose apartment they had broken into by mistake. I began to see everything as part of a single involved epic with hundreds of characters and interlocking plots. I laughed helplessly during a private-eye show when the hero's partner got killed, because I thought it was part of an elaborate hoax cooked up by Laverne and Shirley in response to a crisis that arose in a "M-A-S-H" rerun. And for several hours I thought the commercials were part of a continuing drama about a man fleeing across the country in a series of vehicles, occasionally hiding out with friends to rest and drink beer and soft drinks, while all the time his wife at home was harassed by opinionated female neighbors and overbearing men in white coats who hid in her appliances and lurked in the aisles of the supermarket.

By the morning of the fourth day I was making no connections at all. Images devoid of meaning were passing before me, when suddenly something appeared on the screen that grasped my psyche by the throat and flung me into full consciousness. It was an old Indian woman whose face was like a shriveled potato with two flaming black marbles in it. Everything came into focus. The old woman, apparently a shaman of some kind, was slyly describing her techniques for curing various ailments, and she was definitely putting the audience on. The interviewer, who was completely oblivious to this, leaned over and took a corner of the old woman's beautifully woven shawl and held it up for the cameras.

"Isn't this exquisite? Could you turn a little so that our viewers can get a better look at this?"

It was impressive, even through the dull, homogenizing lens of the TV camera. Its age and grace stood out especially in contrast to the interviewer, who looked as if her face had been sprayed with fixative.

"Isn't it incredible? How old is it?"

"My grandmother's grandmother said she got it from a prairie dog on the moon. I don't know how long *he'd* had it."

"Aren't you nervous wearing it? What if something happened to it! What if it got soiled or . . . or . . . *torn*!!"

For a split second the old woman frowned deeply at the camera, her ebony eyes boring deeply into mine.

"I'd go to the moon and find a tailor!"

Then she burst into a long, raucous cackling that the interviewer had some trouble interrupting. But I hardly noticed. From the moment she'd appeared I knew she was what the spider had intended. And now she had *called* me. I felt certain of it. She had named my town and me in the same sentence. My existence was suddenly in focus. I had a direction. A path.

Sneath

WHEN I CALLED the studio they told me that under no circumstances would they give me the old shaman's address. Or phone number. Only her name, Falling Bear, which they'd already given on the air. They said they'd forward a letter. I said it was urgent, that I couldn't wait that long. (I have no idea why I felt this. It just seemed obvious at the time.) I said that the fate of the world might hang in the balance. They said primly that a world in which the right to privacy was no longer protected was not worth saving.

But when I went in person the next day there was a complete change in attitude. The manager looked at me with an odd expression on his face, but he was very polite. He told me to write down my name and address on a form and he would contact her. I did as he asked, but I didn't like the careful way he took the form and put it away. Like a detective picking up a murder weapon. He actually used his handkerchief.

When I got home I felt restless and uneasy. Time was slipping away. They had arranged to give me my old job back at the printer's, and in another two months I would have to go back to work. So I called Grace, who was sympathetic. It was Grace, by the way, who drove me to the hospital when I had my breakdown. She can be pretty supportive in her own restless way. Now she suggested that we round up Peter, make dinner, and have the collective slide show we'd been talking about for so long. We all had slides of the Mendocino coast, and Grace's plan was to get really stoned, mix up the slides, and try to guess who took what. Grace loves to make a game out of everything. She said you can find out more about a person looking *through* their eyes than looking *into* them.

After a few dozen slides had gone by it became apparent that Grace was guessing right every time, and we demanded to know her system. She said that Peter's slides all looked like socialist-realist art while mine were neo-Dada. I was a little offended, especially when she used as an example one of my favorites, a picture taken on a cliff overlooking the ocean. In the center is a bush shaped something like a chicken. (Peter thought it was more like a duck, which would make the whole thing pointless.) Next to the chicken's beak is a huge boulder, and it looks like the chicken is bending over to pick up a seed bigger than its beak and is puzzled how to go about it. It seemed sort of profound to me—the baffled chicken faced with this overwhelming challenge against the backdrop of the timeless ocean. Peter, of course, saw it as the existential tragedy of modern man, unable even to lift what he greedily wants to consume. Then there was one of a cypress tree where the space between the branches looks like a biplane crashing with a trail of smoke behind. I didn't see anything Dada about it, neo or otherwise.

But all that was forgotten a moment later when a picture appeared on the screen that stumped even Grace. It was a completely unfamiliar intersection on a country road—a gas station and a general store, cowering in a stand of redwoods. Over the store was a sign saying OTHER FORK GROCERY. It didn't look anything like the other slides. The light was different—there was much more contrast. It seemed altogether out of place.

We all denied authorship. Peter suggested that it was from someone else's collection and had gotten mixed in, but no one could

imagine whose or how. We stared at it stupidly for a while. Peter started to change it when I noticed something and stopped him.

Peering out of the store window was a familiar face . . . like a shriveled potato with two flaming black marbles in it.

Other Fork wasn't even on my map, but a trip to the library revealed that it did in fact exist, in a remote, hilly section of the northeastern part of the state. I told Peter and Grace all about the spider and the TV show and said I wanted to go there right away. To my surprise Grace said she'd go with me and even tried to get Peter to come, too. I think she was afraid I was going off the deep end again.

"Athene's flying back East tomorrow to spend the summer with her father, and I don't feel like sitting around the house listening to her empty room. Besides, Taylor needs someone to protect him against spiritual anarchy."

But Peter seemed embarrassed by the whole thing. He said he was writing a paper on social action and had to be near the library.

So the day after Athene left, Grace made about a million sandwiches and we started north. It was bright and breezy and we were very excited, exchanging fantasies about Other Fork and Falling Bear. Grace saw it as a marvelous anthropological opportunity, a chance to study a Native American shaman close to home. And a woman at that. Grace was completely transformed. Freed from parental and academic responsibilities, she was like a veteran girl scout heading off for summer camp—ready and determined to drum a spirit of adventure into her spineless and simpering tentmates. I mean, she's always been kind of bossy and energetic and opinionated, but it seemed to have lost some of its tense, nervous edge. I'd never seen her so carefree. We actually sang songs and played the silly word games that parents teach children on long drives.

But by the time we reached the hills, after several hours of leisurely driving, the sky had become overcast and threatening. It wasn't the time of year when you expected a rainstorm, but it looked very much as if some maverick disturbance was on its way. And sure enough, when dusk came it began to pour defiantly. We put the top up on the Coupe and munched sandwiches in gloomy silence. Grace had drawn a dull stretch of driving—through an interminable forest—

and had her hands full keeping us on the twisting, slippery road. I had almost drifted off to sleep when she slammed on the brakes and I felt us fly into a long, sickening skid. My eyes jerked open to see a house just a few feet from where my nose was jammed against the windshield. It was a classic New England saltbox—white clapboard with dark green shutters—except that its front door sported some delicate gold trim and was flanked by fluted pilasters.

At first I thought we had gone off the shoulder, but when I looked around I realized we were still on the road. So was the house. Over the doorway was a red flag saying WIDE LOAD, and as Grace and I stared at it in bewilderment the door opened, and there, in the glare of the headlights, I got my first glimpse of Delbert Sneath. He was tall enough to have to stoop through the door, and thin enough to walk through it three abreast. He had a mustache so thin it looked penciled on, and was dressed like a tennis player from the 1920s—white pants and shirt, open at the collar, and a white V-neck sweater with red and blue trim. He carried a tall drink in his hand and wore a perpetual near-smirk, as if he had just come in from another room where someone had been telling him something terribly funny and obscene that he didn't want to repeat, but was having trouble forgetting. At the moment the smile had an apologetic curve to it.

"Are you all right?" he asked. "My engine just died completely." He lifted his hands helplessly. "I don't know what to do."

Grace rose to the occasion. "Let's have a look at it. Taylor, you'd better stay here in case a car comes—"

"I think I have a flare in the cab," Sneath interrupted. "I'll just put that right out in the road."

Grace went to work under the hood while I stood around handing her tools and trying to look knowledgeable. When Sneath didn't reappear I thought he might be having trouble lighting the flare in the rain so I went back to help him. He was just getting out of our car. The flare was lit and in the road.

"I was just turning off your lights. Wouldn't want a dead battery on a night like this!"

I was positive we'd turned them off already, but having been in a mental hospital makes you subject to self-doubt. I was going to say something, but just then we heard the truck start up and rushed up

to congratulate Grace on her success. Sneath was effusive, rubbing his hands together like a huge white cricket.

"You've been so kind, I'd like to invite you in for a drink."

"In?"

"There's a rest area just down the road a few miles. If you'll follow me we can stop there. . . ."

It was very appealing. We were wet and tired, and Other Fork was still a couple of hours away.

"You can wash up and have a bite to eat, change your clothes. . . ." He palpated our wet clothing with two skinny fingers, like antennae.

I was still confused about what we were being invited into, but this was cleared up when we got to the rest area. Sneath simply got out of the cab, walked around to the door of the house, and motioned us in. When we got inside we found it was a fully functioning mobile home. Sneath obviously enjoyed our surprise.

"It's a little eccentricity of mine. I detest metal and like having lots of space. I want a house that looks like a house, and I like to move around." He smirked and twitched his long legs luxuriously. "So I masquerade as a house mover. Of course, you can only get away with that sort of thing in the country. . . ."

He asked us where we were going, and I was about to tell him when Grace interrupted with a long tale about some aunt I hadn't seen for twenty years. That kept me pretty quiet because I was afraid I'd say something that contradicted her story. Meanwhile Sneath had broken out a nicely chilled bottle of expensive champagne and some smoked turkey, and we were feeling very pleasant after changing into dry clothes. Sneath seemed only too glad to talk about himself, but I couldn't tell you much of what he said beyond the fact (if it was a fact) that he was independently wealthy and had traveled over much of the world. I didn't know whether it was the champagne or the long drive or the near-accident, but I found it harder and harder to keep my eyes open. I know he talked about his travels for a while and then abruptly brought the conversation around to Africa.

"I've never actually been there myself," he said, looking at me with a peculiar emphasis. "But I've always *so* wanted to go. Have you ever been? Sub-Saharan Africa, I mean."

He extended the plate of smoked turkey toward me in his tweezer-

like fingers, and I knew I was falling asleep because his arm seemed to elongate suddenly from his sleeve and shoot toward me, startling me into a transitory alertness.

"No," I said. "No. I haven't." He hadn't asked Grace, and she didn't volunteer an answer.

"I dream about it sometimes," Sneath went on. "The other night, for example. I had a dream in which a man was threatening to cut off my supply of *palm wine*. . . ." He stressed the last two words a little. "And that was strange because I've never tasted palm wine in my life and don't know a thing about it! Isn't that odd?"

He smiled at me with what seemed in my waning consciousness to be a certain intensity, raising his elastic eyebrows almost to his hairline. I guess I smiled back blearily but said nothing. Grace's lids were at half-mast and falling rapidly.

"What's your theory about dreams?" Sneath asked suddenly. "Do you think they're all wishes? Or do they prophesy? Or do we actually"—he gave a little falsetto titter here—"travel about in them? What do you think?"

I don't know to this day if I ever gave him my theory of dreams, because the next thing I knew I was in the middle of one, swimming in an enormous goldfish bowl with Grace and Peter. There was the usual pebbly bottom and plant life, and a perfunctory underwater castle. We were having a lot of fun swimming through the doors and out the windows of the castle, when Grace pointed to something outside the bowl. We all pressed our noses against the glass, and I was startled to realize, by our reflections, that our faces were becoming alarmingly fishlike. I got very nervous about this. I couldn't remember what I'd been before I was a fish. Meanwhile my mouth was open, lips glued to the side of the bowl. I looked over at Grace for help. She looked a lot like a fish to me. She was pointing with her fins. I looked out. Outside the bowl, Sneath was levitating. He stood about two feet off the ground, clowning, pretending to fall over on his side but never touching the ground. We tried to get Peter's attention, but every time we did Sneath would slyly drop to the floor. Peter, meanwhile, was busy writing something. As he finished a page it would float up to the top of the water, where a large macaw would snatch it up and devour it. With each page the macaw began to look more and more uncomfortable, and finally, with a loud

squawk and flapping of wings, he started defecating small, black, hardbound books. We started to laugh, making bubbles in the water. This angered the macaw, and with one violent blow of his nose (it *was* a nose) he shattered our bowl into a million pieces. We exploded out into the air, and I had a wonderful, soaring feeling of liberation. I was flying in a clear blue sky, looking down on a vast redwood forest. Just below me was a road, with a car parked on the side. It was the Coupe de Grace, and there were two people in it. The one in the driver's seat was Grace. The other was a stranger. They were both asleep. As I flew down to get a better look I heard a motorcycle approaching. It was a cop, and when he roared by the car and saw the sleeping occupants he stopped, turned around, and came back.

During this brief interval several things happened. First, I realized with a shock that the stranger in the car was me. At once it occurred to me that I had no business being out of my body and that if the cop knew I was up here flying around he'd arrest me or send me back to the hospital. I dove for my body and in a second had snapped myself (that's the best I can describe it) back into it. Meanwhile the passing motorcycle must have awakened Grace, because I suddenly felt her shake me and heard her say, "Wake up, Taylor! We've been snookered!" I opened my eyes just as the cop put his head in the window. He asked if we were all right and what we were doing there. Grace explained calmly that we had gotten sleepy on the road and decided to pull over and rest. He nodded, still a little suspicious, checked her license, and finally got back on his motorcycle.

"Get some coffee!" he yelled, and buzzed off.

Grace and I looked at each other. I didn't know what to say. The dreams were just as vivid as the experience with the house, and I was pretty sure *they* weren't real. In the sense people usually mean by the term. I didn't want to scare Grace by talking crazy, and have her take me back to the hospital. But I felt I'd go crazy anyway if I didn't get a stronger purchase on reality. I decided to proceed cautiously.

"Weren't we . . . wearing different clothes before? And wasn't it raining?"

Grace frowned. My heart flipped.

"We went into that house on wheels and had a drink with that weird guy," she said thoughtfully. "How did we get back here?"

We were in fact at the exact spot where we had first stopped. We

found the skid marks and the remains of a sandwich that Grace had tossed aside when she went to inspect Sneath's engine.

"Which is another thing. There was nothing wrong with that engine. Just a disconnected battery cable. I was suspicious of him from the first minute."

I told her about the headlights. We looked through our things to see if anything had been stolen, but nothing was missing. Sneath didn't look like he really needed anything that we had. But then what was it all about? Had he done strange and obscene things to us while we were asleep? What was he looking for? We puzzled and speculated all the way to Other Fork.

When we got to Other Fork we headed right for the grocery store, which wasn't hard to find because that's about all there is to Other Fork. Grace, always curious about the customs of alien creatures, bought a local newspaper while I made inquiries about Falling Bear. I mostly got a lot of blank stares and head shaking.

"Nope. That's a Indian name. Most the Indians live over in New Village."

We walked outside and stood by the car. Grace was deeply immersed in the newspaper. An old man was sitting on a bench nearby, so I tried him out.

"You know that old Indian woman, Falling Bear, lives around here?"

"You mean Louise, runs the gas station?" He pointed. "There she is now."

A half-ton pickup pulled into the gas station, and a fat old woman in jeans and a hunting shirt jumped out.

"That's not. . . ." I looked again. "Thanks."

I made a mental note to kick myself for being so naïve as to think that the TV interviewer was the only one who had been made up. Off camera Louise Falling Bear was as charismatic as Quaker Oats. I was suffocated with doubts. Was I losing it again? Driving hundreds of miles into the wilderness to hunt down some old squaw? On the strength of the random wrigglings of a spider suffering (most likely) from radiation sickness? Just because some chance remark had made a pun on my name? Was I the only Taylor in Las Lunas? Only a

disturbed person would do this. I should sign myself back into the hospital.

I thanked the man and went over to Grace. She looked up from the paper and I nodded toward Falling Bear, who was talking to a mechanic. Grace looked over at the old woman, back to me, and smiled ruefully. I knew what she was thinking. I started to get back in the car when she suddenly tossed the paper through the car window, grabbed my hand, and started purposefully across the street, dragging me along with her.

Louise

YOU'RE PROBABLY WONDERING by now why a mature, responsible woman like me would suddenly drop everything and go tearing across California with a space case like Taylor Bishop in search of a Native American charlatan.

Let me tell you first of all (because Taylor never bothers about such things) that my name is Grace Castleman and that I'm thirty-two (a year older than Taylor) and a single parent. I teach anthropology and women's studies at the university. B.A. from Radcliffe, Ph.D. from Columbia, married at twenty-five and divorced at thirty-one, when Athene was four. So much for vital statistics. I like teaching, but the university is a necrophiliac institution I can barely tolerate. The students are what keep me there, just like Athene kept me in that stupid marriage for so long. I came to the university three years ago, at the same time as Peter, and met Taylor a year later through a

local film club. Taylor hangs out mostly with local artists, musicians, and theater people (every night is amateur night in Las Lunas). He likes Peter and me because we're film fans and (*I* think) because we leaven the otherwise unrelieved saccharine of his entourage with a little academic spite, venom, and all-around competitive nastiness.

When I'm not at the university or hanging around with Taylor's crowd I'm usually practicing aikido—one of the most subtle and elegant martial arts. No one's ever accused me of being subtle, but I was attracted to it the very first time I saw films of the founding *sensei* in action. Here was this little frail-looking eighty-year-old man with a wispy white beard, being attacked by a whole squad of burly young bruisers, and he was effortlessly flinging them all over the room almost without moving—all the time smiling benignly as if he were doing them a favor, helping them into a cab or something. And I thought, "This is for me." That was ten years ago. Now I'm a second-degree black belt, and a complete fanatic.

I've always liked Taylor because he doesn't one-up people, which is a great relief after being around Peter all day. Although Peter's nice in his own way. At least he has a sense of humor. It's good to have male friends that aren't my lovers, and I can't really see getting it on with Peter—or Taylor either, for that matter. Not that I haven't been to bed with some real bozos, but that's neither here nor there.

The question is, why did I go? It's not an easy one to answer. Athene was gone for the summer, the school year had ended, grades were in. I was ready for a change. I had just started an affair with this guy, George, but it wasn't that satisfying. I had a couple of articles to write but I wasn't in the mood. I missed Athene and I was tired of Las Lunas. (It's a pretty town but subject to acute fits of smallness.)

The truth is, I was bored and restless, and when Taylor said he was going on this crazy quest it was like a door opening in my life and someone beckoning. Taylor said, "What about George?" and I suddenly thought, "Screw George!" An adventure like this doesn't come along every day, and George does.

Of course I thought the "adventure" would just be a drive up to Other Fork and back, and a chance to meet some interesting people and do a little anthropological fieldwork. Also, there was something contagious about Taylor's conviction (although, God knows, he had some very similar convictions just before he was hospitalized). And

disturbing as it was the odd encounter with Sneath persuaded me that I'd made the right move.

But Other Fork was a letdown. When Taylor pointed out Falling Bear and I saw this baggy old woman falling out of her jeans, I had an attack of rationality. After all, this woman had been on TV. She probably had anthropologists in every cupboard and told each one a different story. What were we doing here? When I looked in Taylor's eyes I could see the same doubt there. I glanced down, preparing myself to say, "Taylor, let's go home," and if I hadn't had the newspaper in my hand this story might have ended right then and there. Fortunately an item I'd been reading when Taylor came up caught my eye again. It was a speech by the president of the United States in which he portrayed a tiny Caribbean island as a threat to national security, necessitating an invasion that, he said, had restored America's prestige and dignity. Here was the head of the most powerful nation in the world being thrown into a panic by a country so small that it could be submerged in Lake Tahoe, and *he* wasn't plagued with self-doubt. He just marched ahead and did what he believed in no matter *how* crazy it seemed. And got away with it. "Shit," I said to myself. "If he can be crazy I can, too!"

So I squeezed Taylor's hand encouragingly and we marched across the street to the gas station. Falling Bear saw us coming and called out.

"Can't do a thing till Monday."

"No, it's not the car," I explained. "We need. . . ." I hesitated.

"Snake oil? Love potions? Cracker Jacks?" she snickered, looking us over.

We introduced ourselves and before I could unravel my decidedly rusty opening gambit for ethnographers Taylor blurted it right out:

"You're a healer. I want to save the world!"

Louise Falling Bear didn't bat an eye.

"Can't do *that* before Monday."

She motioned to us to wait while she went over to give orders to a mechanic. In a minute or two she was back again and waved us into the pickup. There was a big smelly dog on the seat, but she muttered an unintelligible syllable and he climbed reluctantly down and leaped into the back.

When we were all settled she peeled out and roared down the

winding, skinny road like it had tracks on it. After about a mile she turned onto a dirt road without slowing down. I started to suggest that she must be her own best customer driving over gnarly roads like this all the time, but then I thought better of it. She wasn't saying anything and neither was Taylor. "You want to play inscrutable?" I thought, looking over at her dark, wrinkled face. "I can play, too."

We went almost ten miles on that awful road, and I was just beginning to feel uneasy about having left the Coupe at the intersection with all our things in it when we pulled into a clearing. There was a brook running down between two mountains into a tiny valley, and at the head of the valley was a little knoll, the brook curving around it. On the knoll was a small but very modern A-frame, not at all what I had expected. Louise parked the truck in the drive, let us in, and without a word started making coffee. There were two main rooms—a kitchen and a bed-living room—and a little storeroom in the back. We sat around the kitchen table.

"Nice house," I said, forgetting.

"Beats livin' in a tepee." She started to cackle interminably, barely able to manage the coffee between bursts of hilarity. I kicked myself. Taylor looked troubled and uncertain.

We sat sipping our coffee for a good forty-five minutes. I busied myself watching a fly make passes at a puddle of wet sugar on the table. Louise stared at Taylor a lot. Occasionally she glanced at me, but I didn't interest her that much. Taylor stared back doggedly. Time oozed by. The fly fell asleep. Louise methodically unwrapped a pack of gum and stuffed all five sticks in her mouth, adding them to the considerable wad already there. She'd chew it for a few minutes and then roll it all into her left cheek so she looked like a lopsided chipmunk. She'd leave it there for ten or fifteen minutes at a time and then roll it out and chew it for a while. I was mad at her for putting Taylor through this. People who are mean to Taylor I consign to a special hell reserved for mass murderers, rapists, child abusers, and people who talk in the movies. I was just about to make trouble when the whine of a distant chainsaw roused her to speech.

"Nice day like this always brings out the deadmen," she said, snickering.

"Deadmen?" Taylor asked.

"It makes 'em nervous when things start growing." She stopped and stared intently into Taylor's eyes, then barked at him suddenly. *"Out of control!"*

There was another burst of cackling. I thought to myself, "This woman is bizarre and certainly enjoys her own jokes, but she talks my language."

Finally Taylor couldn't stand the suspense any longer. "I had the feeling when I saw you on that TV show that you were speaking to me."

"That's right!" she agreed, much too readily. "That's what the man told me!" She cackled again. "Look right into the camera like you were talkin' to a friend. Then all those folks out there'll think you're speakin' just to them!"

Taylor stuck to it.

"But you talked about a tailor on the moon, and you looked so . . . intent!"

Louise nodded, frowning a little as she tried to remember. "That's right. I was starin' and starin' at that number-three cameraman. He looked just like a pelican. I had a dream about a pelican. Right 'fore they asked me to be on the show. That's why I went." She suddenly took out her wad of gum and fired it into a large round metal wastebasket, where it reverberated like Big Ben. The wastebasket seemed out of place, and I wondered if she kept the old thing just for the sound effects.

"How did they happen to invite you on the show?" I asked her.

"Tourist fellow came by. Car broke down. I fixed it. Then his back broke down and I fixed that, too. He said I should go on the show. I said okay, but I only went 'cause of the pelican. 'Course . . ."—she looked at us slyly—". . . you have to be careful with that stuff. Sometimes when a bird shits on you it's a message, and sometimes it's just an ornery bird."

There was a silence while we digested all this. Then Taylor started to get up.

"Maybe I was wrong," he said.

Louise grinned. "Want to hear my dream?" she asked.

Taylor sat down again. He hadn't really accepted defeat, although he'd been caressing it with both hands. I, on the other hand, was less than delighted at the invitation. Taylor was a virtuoso dreamer and

loved to narrate them blow by blow. He thought the one induced by Sneath's doctored champagne was particularly significant and on the way up had given me a much fuller account than I really wanted. I can never make that much sense out of other people's dreams. Interpretation is so arbitrary, and dreamers are so prolific. If everybody would just stick to one dream a month it wouldn't be so bad. I'm sure we could all jump right in there and Gestalt the living shit out of it. But the way it is, you never catch up. So I just gritted my teeth and played with my empty coffee cup.

"I was paddlin' across Tomales Bay in a coffin made of leather. In the middle there was a rock with this skinny old pelican on it. He was doin' a little tap dance on the rock. When he saw me watchin' he dove in the water, scooped up a mouthful of fish, and took off. I called to some folks standing on land. They floated up in the air and came and sat on the end of my coffin. There were three of 'em, weavin' a basket. They couldn't talk—just gabbled and gobbled like cormorants. *Looked* like cormorants, too. Long, twisted necks. Then the pelican's pouch got so full a fish slipped out and started to fall. I told 'em to hurry up and finish the basket so they could catch the fish in it, but they just looked at me, like they didn't understand. The fish bounced off the rock and jumped so high it swallowed the sun. That was it."

She looked at Taylor expectantly, as if that should explain everything. Taylor looked puzzled.

"I figured I'd better go," she said, cackling a little. "When the sun goes out, it's time to do something!"

"I had birds and fish in my dream, too!" Taylor broke in, excitedly, and to my acute dismay he proceeded to recount the morning's dream all over again. "Do you see a connection?"

Louise had listened attentively to Taylor's dream, nodding approvingly over the out-of-the-body part, but now she snickered derisively.

"You know what I think about dreams?" she said, leaning forward confidentially. "Too much fatty foods!"

I couldn't stay out of it any longer.

"So you weren't trying to communicate with Taylor, and you have nothing to say to him, right? So we should all go home and stop bothering you, is that it?"

She looked at me and wrinkled her nose in enjoyment. I expected a cackle but none came.

"Back off, captain! Slack your sheets! We're just sniffin' each other out. What about you? You have crazy dreams, too? Fly all over the place?"

"Never," I lied.

"What do *you* want, then?"

"I'm with him. I'm his bodyguard. I'm here to see that no one takes advantage of his good nature." The idea that interviewing Louise might throw light on women's religion seemed suddenly ludicrous.

"Good! Good! Nice Cop and Mean Cop! Makes a good team!" She opened up another pack of gum. "You got a daughter," she said flatly.

"How did you know?"

She snickered. "Injun heap good guesser!"

"What about her?"

"Why you're here."

She said it in an offhand way, dismissing the subject as of no further interest. But I never forgot it, and I'm sure the old cockatoo intended it that way. There were times when those words were my only reason for sticking it out.

"Well," she said, heaving her bulk out of her chair, "I can help you. Teach you a few things you'll need. I warn you, though, lots of trouble where we're goin'."

"Where's that?" Taylor asked, perking up.

"Shit Creek, most likely. You can come if you want."

"Is there some reason why we should?" I was still chewing on what she'd said about Athene.

"Reason? Fat white devil say, 'Reasons grow like blackberries!'"

She fired her hardly chewed gum into Big Ben and went to open the door to the storeroom, leaving me amid the dwindling echoes to cogitate on whether or not she was really familiar with Shakespeare and, if so, what conclusions I should draw from the fact.

"You got sleeping bags?" she asked, returning.

We nodded.

"You can stay here a week. We'll 'save the world' next week. You can sleep in the back. One week. And you buy the groceries." She

turned to Taylor. "I'll teach you to fly." Then to me, smiling: "You can take notes. Learn big medicine!" This led, inevitably, to another bevy of cackles. I was a little paranoid that she seemed to know things about me, but I put it down to that great scientific catchall, coincidence.

"One thing more," she said authoritatively. "As long as we're workin' together, you're going to have to take my word for some things."

"Why?" I asked. "Why should we?"

"Ask why all the time, you'll never get out of bed in the mornin'."

"Never ask why, you'll never get back to bed at night," I snapped back.

She was tickled. But she wasn't budging.

"Redskin take things slow. Makem long silence. Smokum pipe. Speak few words." She then went off into a new attack of cackles and shrieks and coughs, throwing the upper half of her body into such a series of spins and dives that I doubted whether she could pull out in time. I had visions of her crashing and burning before our eyes, leaving us none the wiser for our long journey. I realized she'd put us through that forty-five-minute silence just for the fun of watching a couple of uptight white liberals trying to pass instead of just being their normal talky selves. It pissed me off.

"Meanwhile the world's going up in shit," I said, throwing caution to the winds. "Maybe that's why you lost it last time—too little action, too much smoke!"

That struck her the funniest of all, but she finally sobered up.

"You know how to pick beans?" she asked.

I nodded, puzzled.

"You go pick beans. We'll get the car."

"It's my car."

"Can he drive it?"

"Yes . . ."

"Good. You pick beans."

She turned to get a pot from the back of the stove and handed it to me. I started to ask why, but she anticipated me.

"You want to get movin'. Beans help you travel." She made a farting sound. "Jet propulsion!" More laughter, another abrupt stop. Then she marched out without a backward glance and whistled for

her dog. Taylor gave me an apologetic shrug and trudged after her. I saw them from the window heading for the pickup, single file—Louise, then the dog, then Taylor, looking so docile and so like the creature plodding along in front of him that if the dog had gotten into the cab and Taylor had hopped onto the back I wouldn't have been a bit surprised.

After all, I hadn't fought back myself. I knew she was establishing her authority this way, but why had I accepted it? Being left behind and assigned a menial, "give-the-woman-some-household-chore-while-we're-carrying-on-business" sort of task? She obviously considered Taylor a natural, full-blown, spiritual adept, while she'd spotted me right away as an earthbound anthropologist who was going to have to pay heavy humiliation dues for every shred of probably erroneous information I managed to extract from her. I scuffed my way sullenly out into the garden, watching the clouds of dust settle slowly behind the departing truck.

But the garden itself had a soothing effect on me. There was a quiet, contented buzz to it, as if the plants had a sense of humor about their being thrown together in an odd and unnatural way. The effect was enhanced by a dozen immense sunflowers, which always look out of place wherever they are—obviously having strayed here from some exotic planet whose lower gravity allows them to hold their heads up and grow big enough to provide shade for the weird-looking inhabitants. On their native planet they're called parasol trees.

I had promised myself when I set out on this cockamamy expedition that I would "go with the flow" (but who can ever figure out where the flow is going?). That I wouldn't try to run it or control it or fight it. Just relax, drift along, and let things happen. It was Taylor's show, and I was on vacation. Besides, it would be good for me to do that, I told myself. And I guess it was.

So began, inauspiciously, our week with Louise. In all fairness, I'll have to admit she gave me equal time. Plus I sat in on all her sessions with Taylor and asked her lots of questions. Sometimes she'd answer and sometimes she'd play games, but all in all I could have written a seminal paper on what she told me.

Trouble was, I didn't want to. Half the time I didn't even take

notes. These ethnographic tidbits seemed very thin gruel compared to watching Taylor learn to go out of his body. I wasn't about to join him, but there was no way I was going to just sit around and play conehead while he was getting all the good stuff. After all, there's quite a bit of spiritual discipline in aikido, too—at the highest levels it's *all* spiritual—and although I had no desire to do a Castañeda number with Louise, I knew my aikido could benefit a lot from what she had to teach. In the last year I had hit a kind of plateau—I was perfecting techniques without really improving my power, or *ki*. Louise never completely abandoned the pretense of being an ethnographic informant (a role she had obviously played before, with what results I shudder to contemplate), but she knew my real goal was to strengthen my concentration, and everything she told me was obviously aimed in that direction.

But in every spiritual discipline I know about, concentration entails downgrading the old ego, and that didn't improve my disposition. Especially in the morning. In the first place, I wasn't sleeping well. I'm not crazy about sharing sleeping quarters, even with lovers. Once we've made love I'd just as soon they went home. I only barely tolerated my ex-husband, Waite (and sleeping with Waite is as close to being alone as you can get). Fond as I am of Taylor, I had enough of him during the day. And all this struggle to leave the body made him a very restless sleeper.

To make matters worse, the little room we were sleeping in was basically a storage area. Louise kept a lot of junk in it—staples, hardware, boxes, tools—and before we came along the only vertebrate that ever bedded down in there was her dog, Barghest. (That's my spelling—she says it means "firedog" in some obscure Yanan dialect, but you never know when Louise is serious. It would have been hard to find a more flagrant misnomer for that evil-smelling spongy mass of mange-carpeted fat.) There was only one tiny window, which didn't open, and barely enough room to spread two sleeping bags at angles. Although there were many different kinds of objects in the room, each with its own special aroma, that of Barghest utterly dominated the airwaves. Furthermore, the dog himself, having been displaced from his normal bedroom, was understandably miffed and spent most of each night complaining about it. I

woke up every morning with a headache, and Louise's first cackle inevitably provoked a vicious snarl from me.

Taylor had made it embarrassingly explicit to Louise that he considered himself to be on a personal mission to save the world from nuclear disaster, and, although she seemed to accept this with perfect equanimity, she had taken it into her head that what he needed above all by way of preparation was to learn how to make controlled out-of-the-body journeys at will. She never said how she arrived at this notion. It was just a given for her. She'd say, "If you're gonna learn to fly you gotta do thus and so," just as if he'd sent her an application and enclosed a fifty-dollar deposit. I asked her one day what made a shaman different from other people, and she said being able to leave the body whenever it seemed like a good idea.

Louise rarely condescended to conceptualize, but one day she said to me: "I'll give you big Injun secret. 'Course it won't do you any good. That's why I'm gonna tell you."

"Thanks."

"I'm teachin' Taylor how to be awake when he's dreamin', and how to dream when he's awake."

"Just like that? In a week?"

She snickered.

"He's born to it. But you could learn it, too, if you had enough time."

"Fifty years?"

"More'n *I've* got."

As the week wore on I relaxed some and began to enjoy the routine, being close to the land—even Louise, at times. The discipline started to have an effect on me, and despite the lack of sleep I found I was feeling clearer, calmer, and more centered. My concentration was improving, and every now and then I was even able to extract an interesting nugget or two about Louise's world view.

One day, for example, Taylor was working in the garden and I was helping Louise grind some herbs.

"Tell me about deadmen," I asked her, feeling like a Castañeda clone.

"What about 'em?"

"Who they are, where they come from."

"Omaha. Topeka. Des Moines."

She didn't even smirk, and I might have taken her seriously but she couldn't leave it alone.

"Come from Hole-in-Sky. Great Cave of Winds. Bringum plenty trouble." This was followed by her usual fit of self-congratulatory laughter.

"What do they want?" I asked patiently.

"Want to be alive." She worked in silence for a while. "They're jealous, see? So some of 'em, they pretend."

She stopped to put another stick of gum in her mouth. The wad was getting really huge. Any minute now Big Ben would strike the Hour of Reckoning.

"They're logical, see? Deadmen are great for logic. So they figure this way: What's the difference between bein' dead and bein' alive? Live folks move around and make noise and dead ones don't. So they figure, 'We'll move around a lot and make a whole lotta noise and live folks will think we're alive, too.' So that's two ways to tell a deadman. If he's always movin' around and can't sit still, and if he's makin' a whole lotta noise all the time."

She stopped to increase my supply of raw material.

"'Course they ain't all like that. Some of 'em are just zombies, but they're easy to spot. Can't move their lips or wiggle their shoulders.

"Then there's machines. Deadmen love machines. That's 'cause they make a lotta noise. Ever listen to what they're sayin'?"

"It always sounds like pain to me Like somebody screaming in pain."

"That's right. Different voices. Some of 'em scream, some of 'em whine, some of 'em just grumble or moan, but they're all sayin' the same thing."

She rotated her gum into the other cheek.

"Reason deadmen don't want to be alive is 'cause of the pain. So if they're gonna pretend to be alive they gotta pretend to be in pain sometimes. So they put together all these machines to make pain noises. That'll fool the live folks, and the deadmen won't feel so jealous. And you can believe that or not, just as you like."

I asked her how she could spend so much of her life working in a

garage, if machines were a creation of deadmen. She snickered, lifted the huge wad of gum from her mouth, fired it into Big Ben, and the walls were alive with the sound of metal. She let the reverberation die away before speaking: "Lots of pretty things grow in graveyards."

On the Road Again

TWO DAYS LATER I wrote Peter a letter. It was our last day in Other Fork:

Dear Peter:

You wouldn't recognize us. Taylor has spent the last six days fasting, meditating, and drinking weird hallucinogenic teas, trying to learn how to astrally-project. As you might expect, after thirty years of tripping along the edge, he's an advanced student. He's begun to be able to control his dreams. Life here is a combination of Journey to Ixtlan *and* The Tempest. *I get to play Caliban. This woman is completely crackers but it's fun in its own way. Except that we have to discuss Taylor's dreams every morning at breakfast, which is not my idea of a galloping start on the day. Finally I got competitive and began dreaming myself. Last night I dreamed I was in this huge restaurant filled with small dining rooms, each smaller and*

*more exclusive than the one before. I decided that the answer to the mystery (*what *mystery?!) would be found in the smallest, most exclusive dining room. Louise said it was important, and—would you believe it?—I was set up for the whole day. I know you're going to tell me what a lousy environment this is for Taylor, not conducive to grounding him in reality, and that I'm not fulfilling my responsibilities as a friend as well as informal guardian. God, Peter, your sentence structure is simply awful! You always try to cram too much stuff in. Just like your articles. Anyway, in answer to your completely unprovoked attack on my character, lighten up! We're having a good time in our own demented way, and why should Taylor have to be sane when the whole country's crazy?*

How's your love life? Still hanging out with Luscious Linda? And how's the paper coming?

Don't worry about us (as if you were!). Taylor's like Brer Rabbit in the briar patch. It's a change from academia and that's something.

Taylor sends love. I send big, sloppy, smoochy kisses like your mother used to give you and you had to wipe off with the back of your hand.

Grace

I had just finished the letter when Louise came in from a long hike in the woods. She had a bunch of herbs and roots and looked almost serious. She started chanting as she prepared a foul-looking substance, which she proceeded to spoon into her mouth between syllables of the chant. Then she went to lie down on her bed. She told us she was going on a "journey" and to take a pint of pistachio ice cream out of the freezer (there were at least ten of them in there) and let it get soft. Then we were to sit in absolute silence at the foot of her bed. If she wasn't "back" in an hour, we were to tweak her toes gently until she spoke to us.

We did as she said, and after a few minutes she began to twitch and grunt. Then she let out a scream and a whoop and a bellow and began to talk in a dull monotone in a language neither of us could understand. A half hour went by. We were both starting to nod off when all of a sudden it stopped. I checked my watch, and as I did I heard a snicker from the bed.

"Time for little piggies to market?"

She started to raise herself up, but she was pretty stiff. We helped her hobble into the kitchen, where she proceeded to wolf down the entire pint of ice cream.

"Travelin' makes me hungry." She pushed her plate aside, belched, and sat back contentedly. "You ready to take a trip?"

Taylor and I looked at each other nervously. Neither of us felt at all ready to do whatever it was she had just done.

"Tomorrow morning," she told us, "I'm drivin' to Colorado. You better come, too."

It sounded good to me—a change from Other Fork, at least—and I was up the next morning with the sun, only to find Louise already loading bundles and boxes into the pickup and Barghest already asleep in the passenger seat. I said I was damned if I was going to drive fourteen hundred miles with that smell, but she just laughed and said she was going to take a lot of stuff to her cousin in Denver anyway and we would need two cars once we were there.

When I heard about the cousin I had another rationality attack. Was she dragging us to Colorado for the fun of it? She must have heard the news that white intellectuals will do anything you tell them if you say you're a shaman. No wonder she was laughing herself silly all the time—watching these two docile bozos schlepping beans and sleeping in the dog's room. I was convinced she was going to give us the slip when we got to Denver, which would explain the two cars.

Then I thought, what the hell, so we'll drive to Denver. I have a close friend there, Brandon Valdemar, and I'd love to see him again. My main worry was Taylor. What if he flipped out on me when Louise abandoned us? I was brooding about this while I helped her load the pickup—much too preoccupied to wonder what all the junk was and why she was taking it to her cousin. I just assumed it was all various rural mysteries, like preserves and quilts and things. I didn't get curious until we came to eight toaster-sized objects wrapped in bunny fur. When I picked one up it was much heavier than I expected it to be.

"What are these?"

She grinned. "Heap big medicine. Makem white devils plenty mad." And off she went into spasms of hilarity—as always, her own best audience. After a bit she recovered. "I'll show you when we get

to Denver. You take four in your car. You can look but keep 'em covered. And if you lose 'em, just go home and kiss your ass goodbye."

These mystery objects were my sole reason for believing she was on the level. A slim reed, indeed. Especially after Taylor and I had peeked at one of the furry little devils. It turned out to be a completely nonsensical arrangement of old auto parts—obviously worn out if not defective to begin with—welded together and wrapped in a tunnel of metal rings. There was some kind of switching device attached to the rings, but I couldn't make any sense out of it and neither could Taylor, even with his gift for finding odd and unusual connections. Distributor parts, wheel bearings, piston rings, carburetor parts, generator brushes—a complete hodgepodge. It wasn't much to go on.

Which is what made me call Peter and try to persuade him to come. I wanted support from the real world, someone who was even less psychic than I was. But he insisted he was at a crucial point in his paper on social change, and, when I demonstrated much too conclusively that he'd been at that juncture for two years and another couple of weeks wouldn't hurt, he got defensive and said that in any case he wasn't about to make a fool of himself driving all over the country chasing his shadow. At which point I began to get pretty defensive, too.

"If you're not willing to make a fool of yourself once in a while you're not even living! You're just watching the clock—waiting till it's time to hang up your big green eyeshade!" I was beginning to lose it. "You're just a phony fucking liberal!"

By that time he'd hung up on me. I cried a little and got ready to leave. I never told Taylor about it—he wouldn't have understood why I had called in the first place.

We followed Louise to the gas station, where she told us to go on ahead—that she wanted to take care of some business. She said she'd catch up with us but gave us the address of a hotel and said it was cheap and that if we got separated she'd find us there. Not "look for us there," mind you. Louise never had doubts. But when I asked for her cousin's address she shook her head.

"There's safety in numbers, Captain, but not if they're all in the same hat."

I gave her a long stare. She always called me Captain when I was crowding her.

"Sure, Louise. Sure."

I spun the steering wheel and threw the car in gear, throwing up a cloud of dust into which Louise gradually faded, grin last, like the Cheshire cat. I would have taken odds that we'd never see her again, but by the time we got to the freeway I didn't care. We were going *somewhere.* What the hell, I'm an American: I was brought up on all that open-road shit. You hit the freeway in your convertible—top down, tape rolling—you feel like a queen. It was a gorgeous, sexy day, full of sun and dewy promises, and we were on the move. I looked over at Taylor. My comrade-in-arms. He looked serious and very determined, but he smiled when he saw me looking. I was noticing changes in his face: It seemed leaner and stronger without losing its openness. It made him more attractive. Most men who become immersed in spiritual disciplines get all wispy and humorless, but I guess Taylor was so otherworldly to begin with, it kind of grounded him. I could almost picture making love with him. But to go to bed with someone that innocent would entail so much responsibility it would take all the fun out of it.

For a long time we just relaxed and enjoyed the scenery. At the Nevada border Taylor took the wheel and I tried to fill him in on my limited knowledge of Denver. For me life in Denver revolved around Brandon Valdemar, who taught anthropology there, at Magwich University. Bran had been my thesis adviser at Columbia and had married my roommate, Helen, who was also my closest friend. When she died of leukemia two years after they were married, the grief he and I shared created such a deep bond between us that we were still like family seven years later.

I've always thought families were pretty arbitrary anyway. Taylor read in some occult book somewhere that souls get together between incarnations and decide to be a family so they can work out whatever karmic problems they have with each other. He was very taken with the idea and said it explained everything. He was convinced that some of these decisions were taken much too lightly. He imagined a group of acquaintances sitting around some astral café, high on ambrosia or something, impulsively deciding to be a family even though they hardly knew each other—the way people decide to be

roommates and housemates sometimes. And then they're stuck with it for an entire lifetime, and they think, "What am I doing with these people?" but it's too late. So while I loathe and abominate discussions of past lives, I have to admit Taylor's fantasy appeals to me. I'm much closer to Bran, who's forty-seven, than to my own father, who has always been very sweet and loving but with whom I have very little in common.

Less than two hours into Nevada a police car came alongside us and signaled Taylor to pull over. Since we were in the right lane, with cars passing us frequently, I asked the cop, a little aggressively, what was wrong. He ignored me.

"See your license, sir?"

Taylor handed it over and the cop phoned it in. I could see him writing down stuff, and I started to get mad. I was tired of cops sticking their heads in my window.

In a minute he came back.

"You were ten miles over the limit. I'm going to let you go with a warning."

Taylor nodded agreeably, but the cop seemed reluctant to leave it at that. He looked in the back and noticed Louise's bunny-fur-covered contraptions on the floor. I cursed myself for being too lazy to repack the trunk.

"What've you got there?"

I jumped in.

"They're sculptures. I'm taking them to a gallery in Denver."

It was a poor choice. Sculpture to him meant nude women in fountains or uniformed necrophiliacs on horseback. I could see his brain struggling manfully to fit the Venus de Milo into a bunny-fur suit, like a mother trying to get mittens on two-year-old fingers. He frowned.

"Mind if I have a look?"

"Not at all," Taylor said.

I decided that boldness was the best policy, so I grabbed one, unveiled it, and held it out.

"Isn't it beautiful?" I burbled. "It's all made from found objects. Old auto parts. I'm going to mount them on blocks of black marble four feet high, with the fur underneath and sort of dripping down the marble like blood—you know, kind of the casualties of technol-

ogy: animals run over in the road, birds flying into jet engines. I'm going to light them from above and place them about ten feet apart in a circle—they'll be the only thing in the room. They'll be all polished up, of course, and covered with bits of white Styrofoam." (By this time I had no idea what I was saying.) "It'll be smashing!"

There was a long pause before he could get his Captain Kirk act together again.

"I'd like to look at the others if you don't mind."

Taylor got out and gestured him in. The cop reached in the back and uncovered each of the contraptions in turn. Then he reached under the front seat. It looked like he was searching for drugs or something, and I thought nothing of it at the time, although it did cross my mind that he wasn't very thorough. Then he straightened up, nodded, cautioned Taylor to drive more carefully, and walked back to his car. He was just getting in when Louise's pickup roared past doing at least ninety, and he took off after her. We followed at a more modest pace, expecting at any moment to find them pulled over at the side of the road. Miles went by. After about fifteen minutes we saw the cop in the breakdown lane, alone. His car was stuttering and lurching and gave out altogether as we passed. A few minutes later we caught up with Louise, cruising at a very moderate speed, singing along with her dog, Barghest. We could hear them faintly as we went by, and, to tell the truth, her singing wasn't much more musical than the dog's. They had their heads together and would start and stop together on cue. I don't know what they thought they were singing, but whatever it was they were agreed on it. They looked so content howling away with each other that for a brief moment I lifted my mental boycott on Barghest.

When Louise saw us she pulled alongside. We asked if she'd seen the cop, she nodded, grinning.

"I zapped him," she shouted. "Pretty effective, eh?"

"With what?"

But she had started singing again, Barghest joining in on cue.

Polly

IT BOTHERED ME that Grace mistrusted Louise. Louise was the first person I'd ever met who made me feel completely legitimate. When I'd say the kinds of things that made most people look at me strangely, she'd just react as if what I said was perfectly normal. Not that Grace herself hasn't always been totally accepting, but there's a big difference between someone loving you because you're a little crazy and someone not thinking you're crazy at all. Besides, Grace wasn't a bit interested in going out of her body, and that created a little gap between us.

Louise seems to think I have a real flair for this sort of thing. She says to be a shaman you have to be able to respond to the living spirit in every object, and if that's true I guess I have a head start on most people. When I'm washing my dishes, for example, and I put wet silver into the dish drainer I can hear the ones that are already there

yelling, "Oooohhh! You're splashing us! And we just got dry!" And I always feel sorry for the glasses in the back of the cupboard that never get used, especially when the other glasses sneer at them. (Glasses can be very mean sometimes.) I usually try to rotate them once in a while so they all get to experience different kinds of situations. I also feel bad for the last banana in a bunch, after all its friends are gone. I imagine how lonely it must feel.

Grace says I'm a pagan, which is a compliment in her book. She says pagans realize that God is in everything, which is much more ecological—that when they took God out of everything and stuck Him up in the sky it just opened the door to every kind of pollution.

When we finally stopped for dinner just inside Utah, Grace was on Louise like a ferret.

"What did you do to that cop car?"

"I got him with my Gormanizer."

"Okay, what's a Gormanizer?"

"Those things you got four of in your car," she said. "You better get acquainted with 'em because you'll be usin' 'em in a couple of days."

Before she retired to Other Fork, Louise told us, she had run a very profitable garage in Gorman, California. Gorman isn't all that much bigger than Other Fork, but it's located at a strategic spot between Los Angeles and Bakersfield on Highway 5. Strategic because cars break down there a lot. No one knows why, but they do. There are several garages there, and they do a big towing business. So Louise had the idea of synthesizing the knowledge that she had acquired in the somewhat divergent traditions of auto mechanics and shamanry. First, she began collecting damaged and defective auto parts. Not just any old parts—they all had two things in common: Each had caused a breakdown on the road, and each had triggered an outburst of rage from the car owner. Louise kept these parts in an old metal box for years, and whenever she encountered a particularly irate and dyspeptic customer she would set the box down beside him and expose the parts to additional doses of hostile radiation. She called this "charging" them. Like a battery. When they were ready, after several years, she welded them together in patterns that were mechanically absurd but made sense to her from her

knowledge of constructing medicine bundles. The rings were for directing the "zap," as she called it, and the switching device allowed her to reverse the direction and "recharge" it. She wrapped them in bunny fur, she said, for the same reason that you wrap plutonium in lead.

To be truthful, she didn't really tell us all this at dinner. Just a little of it. The rest we learned in bits and pieces later on.

Louise was full of surprises. That night she insisted on our staying in a motel. A particular motel. She told us the name of it over dinner, and which exit to take off the freeway. Yet when we got there a few hours later she couldn't find the office, and it was pretty apparent she'd never been there before.

"Why this one?" Grace wanted to know.

"Paleface tepee makum good vibration!" Louise said with an explosion of chuckles.

Grace gave her a disgusted look. "I never learn, do I."

There was nothing about the motel that raised it above the monotony of the norm, but it was pretty cheap and we were tired. We all chipped in on one room—Barghest, luckily, opted to stay in the pickup—and I don't think anyone was awake more than a few minutes.

An hour later, around 3:30 A.M., a loud chanting woke me up. A single, repeated phrase. It was overhead, moving rapidly away in an easterly direction. As I listened it faded into the distance, leaving me feeling eerie and uneasy, the way I do just before an earthquake. But nothing happened, and I went back to sleep.

I dreamed I was in a barn, brushing down a beautiful black horse, when a little thumping noise distracted me. I looked down on the floor and saw half a dozen of what I thought were rabbits, hopping all over the room. When I looked closer I saw that they were strangely constructed little men. They had no torsos at all; each had just a head, a right hand growing out of the neck, and one enormous foot. They looked quite cheerful hopping about, humming and muttering busily, but when they noticed me looking at them one pulled out a trumpet and blew a tremendous blast that shattered the barn into a million fragments and woke me up.

Grace was just waking up, too, but Louise was already gone. I looked out the window and saw her talking to a woman who

couldn't have been more than twenty and was completely punked out in a purple mohawk, black jumpsuit, and spike collar. They looked as if they were just chatting, which wasn't like Louise. Behind them was a huge, shiny, copper-colored van, which apparently belonged to some heavy-metal rock group because it had jagged red-and-black letters on it saying CRUSHED NUTS. After a few minutes the woman with the purple mohawk got into the van and Louise walked over to her pickup. I saw her unwrap a Gormanizer, but I couldn't see what she did with it.

Louise had been pretty brisk about our timetable, but for some reason she seemed to be in no hurry to get through breakfast. We were still lounging around the table an hour later when the woman with the purple mohawk spotted us through the window and came rushing in.

"Hey, could you give me a ride to Denver? The van's broken down, and I have to be there by tomorrow night. I think those creeps did it on purpose!"

Louise nodded.

"Sure," she said. "You can ride with them."

"Sure," said Grace. "You can ride with *her*."

Morning isn't Grace's best time and she likes to issue her own invitations. The purple-mohawk woman looked a little confused. In spite of the intimidating outfit she seemed kind of vulnerable and unsure of herself. And her speaking voice, as Grace said later, made Marilyn Monroe sound like Ethel Merman. Grace relented.

"It's okay, you can ride with us." She looked uneasily at the spikes. "No hugging, though."

"Oh, thanks! You saved my life! See, I've got a gig with this women's band, and Wilbur's really pissed off about it. Wilbur's the lead singer for Crushed Nuts. He's afraid I'm gonna leave the band just when we're getting big. I mean, "Suck My Dead Spaghetti" is nineteen on the charts and could go even higher, and we're starting to get really great gigs. But, you know, I get tired of playing with guys all the time. I mean, Wilbur's a real little Hitler, and the other guys are totally childish. I mean, you wouldn't believe the crap of which those guys are like capable! So I figured, shit, they don't own me—I can sing with anybody I want to as long as I don't miss a gig

or anything. I need a little variety—a little vacation from all that grossness, if you know what I mean. *They* don't have to be in Denver till the day after tomorrow, so I figure they sabotaged me, which is something they're completely capable of. It completely pisses me off, you know? I mean, actually going that far? 'The van's broken, Polly. I don't know what's the matter with it!' I mean, give me a break, really! Can you believe it?"

Louise grinned, and we introduced ourselves all around. The mohawk woman said her name was Polly Morfuss, but she didn't say whether it was a performing name or her own.

Polly chattered away nonstop until we got to the Colorado border, then fell asleep and didn't wake up till we pulled into Denver late that afternoon. I don't remember much of what she said. It was mostly about the band. There was just one anecdote that stuck with me, I think because I was still bothered by my dream about the trumpet. (Grace says my mind works entirely by free association.) Polly was still talking about the band:

". . . So one night these really straight-looking guys showed up. I think they were feds—I mean, they had dark suits and everything. And they kept asking about this one song we play. It's mostly instrumental, real heavy metal, with this short phrase repeated over and over. And these guys were unbelievable! They wanted the music, which was a joke, you know, because musically the guys in Crushed Nuts are practically illiterate. I mean, they're talented and everything, but it's all by ear. And those feds were really persistent, I mean off the scale. If Wilbur hadn't given them a tape they'd still be there. And afterward I went out to get some air and they were standing by the car, you know? And they kept talking about 'Joshua.' 'Joshua' this, 'Joshua' that. It was really crazy! 'Joshua. Project Joshua.'"

Denver

GRACE SEEMED RELIEVED when we dropped Polly off at a house on the outskirts of Denver occupied entirely by the women's band, Female Energy. We exchanged local phone numbers, and she invited us to come see her at the café where they played. She also said we should come to the Crushed Nuts concert at the end of the week, and we said we'd try. Grace sounded particularly insincere.

When we got into the center of town Louise pulled us over and told us to park and follow her on foot. She went into a little park and sat on a bench. She looked like some kind of bag lady. We sat down next to her and saw that she had two of the Gormanizers with her.

"Have to recharge one of 'em and I thought I'd better show you how."

Then she just sat there and looked at the people passing by. Grace began to fidget. Fifteen minutes passed. Louise dipped into her bag, pulled out one of the Gormanizers, and set it in her lap. A moment later a Corvette came roaring around the corner and down the street

in front of us. Pedestrians jumped out of the way, cursing and making angry gestures. Louise pointed the Gormanizer at the Corvette and it immediately sputtered and died, coasting to a stop at the intersection. It was one of life's more satisfying small moments.

I saw why Louise had chosen that particular intersection. Two streets merged on one side, creating a bottleneck. When Louise zapped a pickup as it screeched up to the stalled Corvette and tried to pass it on the right, the two stalled vehicles completely plugged the flow of traffic. In a few moments there were two long lines of honking cars. Louise reversed the switches on both Gormanizers, and we strolled over toward the center of the action. The two drivers were desperately trying to restart their cars, but as we walked up they both leapt out and began alternately waving the honking cars out into the unremitting stream of oncoming traffic, giving them the finger, and kicking their own cars in frustration. Louise added fuel to the fire by offering the two men a great many helpful hints as to what the trouble might be, and by the time a policeman had arrived to unscramble the situation, the Corvette owner had put a $600 dent in his car with his fist, and the pickup owner, forced to vent his rage on sturdier stuff, was nursing a broken toe. Louise was very pleased, and as the two men began to turn on each other she led us away, back to our own cars, which she had had the foresight to point in the other direction.

"Don't use these until I tell you," she said firmly, trading the two Gormanizers for the four we had. "You'll need 'em fresh. I'll call you in a couple of days."

We drove behind her for a few blocks. Then she honked and pointed at a shabby but respectable-looking hotel, and we realized this was where she meant us to stay. We pulled over, and Louise made a left and disappeared.

"That's the last we'll see of her," Grace said moodily.

Grace got a room on a different floor from mine and fled into it immediately.

"Much as I love you, Taylor, we've had too much togetherness in the last two weeks, and I need a little SPACE!"

She almost shrieked it.

When I got to my own room I took a quick shower and decided to

practice Louise's exercises. I had never voluntarily left my body without Louise being there, and I wanted to try. Lying on the bed I concentrated on picturing myself as longer than my body—able to expand and contract myself at will. Then I slid out altogether and floated up to the ceiling. I explored a crack or two, turned some somersaults, and drifted over to the the overhead light fixture to admire the dust and insect corpses inside the globes. I was particularly impressed with two spiders whose legs were interwoven in a complicated pattern. Had they died in an embrace? In combat? Or did they just slide into each other in a simultaneous and vain struggle to escape the burning heat? It seemed like a profound mystery. I stared at them so long my eyes got blurry. Maybe "stared" isn't quite the right word. How could I stare when my eyes were at least twenty feet away? The moment this thought entered my mind the image before me crumpled, and I was sucked back into my body like a thumbtack into a vacuum cleaner. I could hear a distant phone ringing, and when I opened my eyes it came closer and turned out to be mine.

It was Grace, telling me she'd just talked to her friend, Brandon Valdemar, and he wanted us to come over for dinner. I think she really called to make up for having been kind of short with me. Grace thinks I'm a lot more fragile than I am.

When I hung up the phone I was startled to find that almost an hour had gone by since I first lay down. I had only been "floating" for a minute or two. Had it taken me that long to get "out"? Or was I asleep all the time, dreaming the whole thing? I looked up at the fixture. If I had actually been up there, the entwined spiders should still be visible.

I flicked on the lights. There were a few blurry shadows, but the glass reflectors were frosted and I couldn't see enough to tell. I looked around for a way to climb up so I could look inside. The furniture was all too low for this old high-ceilinged room, and the chairs had splayed-out legs so I couldn't put one on top of the narrow chest of drawers.

I called room service.

"I'd like a ladder in room 703."

There was a substantial pause.

"A what?"

"A ladder."

Another pause.

"That some kind of sandwich?"

"No. I mean a *ladder*. To climb on."

"You need something fixed?"

"No."

Another pause.

"We don't have any ladders in room service. Call housekeeping."

Housekeeping was suspicious. They obviously thought I was planning to implicate them in some kind of exotic suicide attempt. I realized I was going to have to engage in deception.

"It's the overhead. One of the lights keeps blinking off. It's driving me crazy."

They said they'd send someone up as soon as they could.

After I hung up I started to panic. What would I do when the man came and the light wasn't blinking? I'd have to say it had stopped. He'd probably look at it anyway, but how would that help me? I couldn't very well run up the ladder behind him and peer over his shoulder. If I asked to use the ladder he'd want to know why: "We're not insured for guests on ladders. . . ." Before I realized what I was doing I had dashed out the door and started prowling the corridors, looking for a maintenance cart or an open closet. But the floor was buttoned up tight. I ran down the stairs to the floor below. Nothing there. Another floor. Still nothing. The futility of what I was doing began to impress me, and I was about to go back when I rounded a corner and saw an open maintenance closet. Brooms, linens, equipment of all kinds . . . and a short stepladder behind the open door. I grabbed it and took off. A guest in the corridor looked at me a little strangely as I headed for the stairs, but I just smiled and nodded pleasantly. I ran up the two flights and back to my room, terrified that the maintenance man would be there already.

When I got inside I quickly set the ladder up under the fixture. By standing on the very top I'd be able to see into the globes. I climbed up uneasily and stood, bracing myself against the ceiling with one hand. I hadn't realized how important it was to me, but I was shaking as I looked into the globe where I had seen the two entwined spiders.

It was empty.

The Alchemist

I WAS UNACCOUNTABLY depressed as I went down the ladder. I had wanted to believe I was making progress. But it was all fantasy: Freud was right. I glared up at the fixture. The four lamps smirked back at me. Dreams, they said. Nothing but dreams. You're a dreamer. One of them winked knowingly. You've always been a little batty, it said, batting its eye. I stopped glaring. What *was* that? The illusion of winking came from one of the faint blurry shadows I had noticed before. But it wasn't in the same globe. The spiders I had seen were in the lamp diagonally opposite. Still. . . .

I moved the ladder, climbed up again, and looked into the other globe. There they were, locked in each other's arms. Somehow more vulnerable and appealing in death than I ever found them in life. I looked down at the floor. Everything was as I had seen it when I was out of my body, except for the fact that left and right were reversed. I

sat down on the top of the ladder and tried to figure it out. Had I gone out of my body upside down or something? It made no sense. But the important thing was that I had actually been where I thought I had been. I *was* making progress! I scurried down the ladder, sneaked it back to its closet without incident, and climbed back onto the bed, all primed for new experiments.

But somehow it was harder now that I knew I could do it on my own, with no Louise to protect me. I thrashed and settled and thrashed and settled, but I couldn't arrange my body comfortably in the right position and ended up just falling asleep.

I dreamed I was sitting on the lip of a huge funnel, looking down the slippery sides. It was a deep bronze color and kept undulating and shimmering as if it were coated with oil, like a griddle. I leaned forward to see better, and slipped.

I was sliding down the enormous incline, scrabbling and clutching at the slick surface. Below me was a bright bluish light, and as I plunged into it, shading my eyes from the glare, I saw that I was falling toward the mouth of an enormous blue jug. When I was almost there it began to move, as if to evade me. I kicked my feet and twisted my body, trying to get closer, but every time I corrected my course it would dodge away in a new direction. Finally I gave up, and instantly I was inside the jug, standing on the ground. It was damp and sweet-smelling, like a greenhouse. Before me was another jug, lying on its side, half-buried in the sand. I walked into the mouth of *that* jug and found myself standing in front of another. Each jug was a little smaller than the one before, and darker, until at last I entered a jug no larger than a closet. It was completely dark. There was nothing. I saw nothing, heard no sound, felt nothing, smelled nothing, and tasted nothing, except fear. Then even the fear stopped.

Out of the void I heard a faint noise. A humming. The noise made by an old man or woman working at some domestic task: mindless, aimless, formless humming—a little dotty around the edges, the crooning of a private song too old to reveal, too personal to share, punctuated by chuckles and brief skirmishes with the ever-advancing phlegm of eternal rest.

Then fire. A face, lit by the flames. Old. Familiar but fogotten. The eyes closed, humming. The humming becoming a chant. A crucible

took shape over the flame, glowing. Two hands emerged from dun-colored robes and began warming themselves over it. Suddenly they plunged into the crucible. I screamed in anticipation, but the hands reemerged unscathed, holding a heavy piece of metal about the size of a basketball. After a moment the hands plunged the metal back into the crucible and again lifted it out. They did this over and over, hundreds of times. I was hypnotized—it was like watching the pendulum of an old clock. Then at last the hands came out holding a slippery wet infant with curly black hair. The old face smiled in triumph and put the infant down on the floor. Immediately it started to creep and crawl, then staggered to its feet and ran toward me. By the time it reached me it was a full-grown man, powerful and hairy but with a face exactly like the one I see in the mirror every day. I shrank against the wall and the figure rushed past me, back the way I had come. As it receded into the distance it seemed to stoop and get shorter, hobbling along with a cane but without slackening its speed in the slightest. It looked so funny I started to laugh and turned, full of questions, toward the creature by the crucible. But the hands and face were gone, the fire out, the crucible cold. I heard a rushing of wings and looked up. A winged tyrannosaurus at least a hundred feet high was standing on its hind legs, lashing its huge tail and glaring down on me. In its stumpy little clawlike hands was a long trumpet, which it now started to play, keeping time by pounding the floor with its tail and beating its wings. The pounding made me dizzy and confused and I started to have trouble seeing and hearing. Finally it all blurred into grayness and I woke to hear a knocking on my door.

"Housekeeping!"

It wasn't easy to convince the man that the problem with the lights had disappeared, but he finally shrugged and went away.

It was pretty late by now, time to get ready for dinner. But I was having trouble dealing with simple acts like unpacking and getting dressed. I kept losing things, dropping things, bumping into things. The dream seemed like some kind of warning or alarm—someone trying to get a message through. And it was the second time I had dreamed about a trumpet. I felt I should be doing something, but I didn't know what.

Later, when I talked to Grace about the dream, she said the old person at the crucible sounded like one of those medieval alchemists,

so the next morning I went to the library and read everything they had on the subject, but it just confused me.

I couldn't shake the dream. Maybe because the funnel at the beginning, sucking me into a great void, kind of reflected our situation. Neither of us had the dimmest notion of what we were getting into. That Louise had some kind of power even Grace no longer doubted. Not after the Gormanizer episode. But what was it for? And what was she doing with Polly? Had she "zapped" the Crushed Nuts van? And if so, why? And who was the alchemist hiding inside all those jars? And why had I visited him?

At this point all our odd little adventures seemed meaningless and unrelated. We were dimly aware of watching some game being played, but with unknown symbols and in a foreign tongue—and we had no idea what the rules were, or the identity of the teams, or when play began and ended. We still thought of ourselves as bystanders, those first few days in Denver, and luxuriated in the fantasy that we could choose to involve ourselves or not.

Freebies

BY THE TIME we got to Denver I'd had it with everybody. I was sick of Polly's vacuous chatter, sick of Louise's snickering and mysteriousness—even Taylor's earnest solicitude was getting on my nerves. I wanted to hide in a little room somewhere and read a book and not have anyone talk to me for seven days.

But all I really needed was some time alone for a short nap and a long bath. In between the two I called my friend Brandon Valdemar to tell him I was in town, and his obvious delight revived me immediately. He invited us for dinner and told me he was going to ask a terribly big favor in return, which he wouldn't tell me about until I had been well plied with food and drink. With some people such a build-up would have made me nervous, but Bran's that way. He'll come up to you with an expression of such gravity you think there's been a death, and with much sighing and hesitation announce that

he's about to make an outrageous demand on your friendship. Your mind races as you mobilize and test the limits of your generosity: Would you be willing to loan him the five thousand dollars he's going to ask for? Could you give up your car for six months? Are you willing to put up his relatives—a family of four with two Dobermans and a Great Dane—in your living room until they find a place to stay, which might be forever? Then he sheepishly asks to borrow a book or for you to help him pick out a present for someone or something equally trivial, and you find yourself pressing him to accept other favors out of the surplus store of generosity you've so hastily and vigorously amassed. He's just compulsively afraid of wearing out his welcome, a concern that deserves a prominent place on the *Guinness* list of the world's most irrational fears.

Bran is middle-aged, tall, and elegant, with long slender fingers and a slight stoop to the shoulders—traits that have occasionally led hostesses to proffer their grand pianos, although in fact he can't play a note. He was born and educated in England and has an impeccable "university" accent. But his family is actually Russian, although they've been in England for generations, and his mother, who died when he was twelve, apparently spoke with a thick Slavic accent. I found this out from Helen, my roommate, before she and Bran got married. Bran was deeply attached to his mother, and whenever he'd had too much to drink (which meant anything at all) he would unconsciously mimic her speech. Helen and I used to get him high at every opportunity just to hear that rich, throaty, melodious sound break through, like one of the Three Faces of Eve. It was such a contrast to the cheerful crispness of his everyday demeanor that we never tired of calling it forth. But the Secret Slav went underground when Helen died, and had never reemerged.

At dinner that night Bran and Taylor seemed at ease with each other right off—the brotherhood of misfits. I got Bran talking about the days when Helen and I were still roommates and he was trying to be unobtrusive about his interest in her.

"I was thoroughly convinced," he said, laughing, "that Grace would treat my willingness to trot over to her apartment for thesis discussions at all hours merely as a sign of avuncular conscientiousness. Then I began to notice that Helen was always there and that the thesis topic was never mentioned by anyone."

But he began to look sad at the memory so I switched the conversation around to Taylor's fantasy about the astral café—where souls gather to decide when, where, and with whom to incarnate. Bran was quite taken with the notion.

"You're absolutely right," he said. "Some families definitely have the ring of something thrown together in a drunken impulse, while others seem to be composed of long-time cronies."

"All the people in my family are completely practical," Taylor elaborated. "Except me. And they all seem to understand each other. I never know what to say to them, or how to break in. I have the feeling I must have been in the astral café near closing time, wandered over to a strange table, and got caught up in a moment of good fellowship." He paused thoughtfully. "I think the families that have the most fun are the ones that have had a bunch of lifetimes together."

He went on to talk with some puzzlement about his confused relationship with his father.

"Ah, fathers and sons!" Bran said, smiling. "Fathers and sons are like sellers and buyers in a marketplace. It doesn't matter what the son wants or needs, the father tends to unload whatever he's got overstocked in his inventory. The son wants love, the father gives dependability. The son wants dependability, the father gives respect. The son wants respect, the father gives love. And on those rare occasions when they manage to agree on the commodity to be sold, they're so startled and confused to find themselves on the same wavelength that they haggle bitterly and interminably over the price."

I was pleased they were hitting it off. I was also relieved to find that Bran still seemed relatively untouched by the desiccating influence of university life.

Bran was something of a deviant at Magwich. He was disrespectful toward prevailing intellectual and scientific fashions and carelessly expressed ideas that "no one holds today." He was also an extremely popular teacher but they couldn't punish him for it since he already had tenure, having made his reputation before anyone realized how good he was.

The academic world, you must understand, is divided into a series of clubs, each with its own traditions and house organs. Tenure is

achieved by publishing somewhere between twelve and sixteen execrably written papers in one of these house organs. Sometimes a book or two will serve, as long as no one outside the club reads it. Otherwise it becomes "popular," that is, no longer subject to the customs, conventions, and guidelines of the club.

Once every decade or so the system breaks down and allows a marginally "popular" book to slip through the usually vigilant sphincter of departmentalism. At this point there is a great flurry of excitement and controversy, for even one important idea in a decade is more than the digestive system of an academic discipline can accommodate. But after a year or two the robes are shaken out, the folds smoothed and rearranged, and all goes on as before, except that now there are new customs, conventions, and guidelines. Truth has decked herself out in a new outfit—different from, but just as unflinchingly absolute as, the one before.

The great favor Bran wanted was for me to be an outside reader for one of his doctoral students, who had to leave in a week to go back into the field. It meant reading an archaeological thesis involving some artifacts recently dug up near Corinth that seemed to throw light on women's religious festivals in fifth-century Greece. Since women's religion is one of my fields, my participation would save Bran the trouble of scratching up some unknown quantity who might be hostile to the enterprise. I agreed to do it and Bran invited us to stay at his house as long as we were in Denver. But Taylor insisted on staying at the hotel until Louise called and he could give her our new address.

The next two days were heavenly for me. I got to sit out in Bran's garden, listening to the birds and looking at the mountains. The only reptile in this Eden was the thesis. Reading academic writing is like watching a soap opera—you can go away for a couple of pages and find that nothing has changed when you tune in again—and I could never read for more than a half hour without falling asleep. But in between I chatted with Bran, ate like a pig, and guzzled a lot of very good wine.

My garden reading was enlivened at one point when Taylor and I made some kind of astral contact. He claimed he flew over and saw me sleeping, and I had to believe him since he described everything

perfectly, like the way the thesis had fallen on the ground and the way Bran's cat was sleeping on my chest, asphyxiating me with her fishy breath. At exactly the same moment I was having a dream about Taylor, and since Louise claims you're out of your body *every* time you dream—you're just not conscious—I guess I was up there with him.

I dreamed that Taylor came floating up to me in a lotus position, dressed in orange robes like a Buddhist monk, with his head shaved and the whole works. But sticking out of the front of his robes he had this huge erection. I was annoyed and yelled at him: "You can't have it both ways, Taylor!" He got very flustered and kept saying, "Don't mind me! Don't mind me!"

When I woke up and turned back to the thesis, I found myself mired for a long time in a dull section that analyzed a lot of half-sentences from broken shards and made the usual silly but conventionally accepted inferences ("Surely we can assume . . ." "Evidently what was intended here was . . ." "Apparently a misspelling of . . ."). I was finally rescued by the corporeal voice of Taylor calling to say that Polly had invited us all to the café where Female Energy was playing. As her guests. I was a little skeptical—there are freebies that aren't worth the price—but Taylor wanted to go and Bran was curious. I hadn't told Bran much about our adventures—just that we were vacationing, had met an old shaman, and were following her around for the hell of it.

So that night the three of us piled into Bran's car and drove to the Mountain Gorilla Café. It was a big, barnlike place in a section of the city that couldn't make up its mind whether to try for intellectual chic or just relax and deteriorate. The café itself was dark and roomy, with about twenty wooden tables of odd sizes and shapes, a couple of couches, and occasional chairs scattered about. A few big ferns and rubber plants and some dark heavy drapes added to the air of funky gentility. It was the kind of place where you'd expect to see a cello and people playing Go or chess. It made me miss Las Lunas. There was a low bandstand on one side with just barely enough room for the musicians—two guitars, drums, keyboard, and sax. Polly, who was there primarily as a vocalist, waved to us enthusiastically as we came in.

The band was pretty good and the place was jammed, but the big

surprise was Polly, whom I'd only known as an extremely soft-spoken flake. She turned out to have the biggest, raunchiest, nastiest, get-down singing voice I'd ever heard on a white woman under two hundred fifty pounds. Bran was transfixed. Whenever she wasn't singing he peppered us with unanswerable questions about her. At the end of the set Polly herself came rushing over.

"This is just incredible! You actually came! I can't believe it!"

We complimented her and introduced her to Bran, but she hardly glanced at him.

"Are you coming to the big outdoor concert Saturday afternoon? Crushed Nuts is the featured band!"

We must have looked doubtful: Overamped male hostility has never been my favorite form of entertainment, and the one number we'd heard on the radio had done nothing to alter that feeling.

Polly picked up on our lack of enthusiasm.

"I guess you're not into it, huh? Hey, I'm not exactly overwhelmed with Crushed Nuts myself, but I've gotta hang in for a while, like Janis Joplin with Big Brother. It's an opportunity! I'll tell you something, though. *Somebody* thinks we're special! Remember those feds I was telling you about? They told Wilbur we couldn't play that instrumental number at the concert Saturday. You know the one I mean? It's called "Pus Bus." It goes *yub-dub-dub, yukka-dukka, yukka-dukka, yub-dub-dub*—"

"We get the idea," I said.

"Anyway, they said we couldn't play it! Can you believe that? I mean, we're a fucking *band,* for Christ's sake! What right do they have coming in and . . . I mean, *Jesus!* It's unbelievable!"

"So what happened?"

"Well, Wilbur got pissed and told them to fuck off, but they took him aside and said they had really good reasons and it was top secret and if he'd come with them they'd tell him what they could. So of course Wilbur was real curious and went along and they told him. And when he came back you should have seen him! He's walking around real pompous, you know, like Henry Kissinger or something: 'I am privy to classified data which you could not possibly understand and therefore I have to be a highly responsible person now and you have to do as I say and trust me implicitly and we can't play "Pus Bus" at the concert Saturday.' So naturally we all went nuts

on him. I mean, that's not literally what he said but that's just what it came out like. So we said, like, 'Who do you think you are with all this responsibility shit, you fucking coke-head?' and stuff like that, and after about an hour of all of us hassling him and threatening not to play, he cracked and told us what they had said, which was something about the sound vibrations of that particular piece screwing up their radar and making it impossible to detect incoming enemy missiles.

"Well, it sounded really farfetched to me but Wilbur's such a twit he'll believe anything if you say it loud enough. But *I* didn't believe it and I wanted to play it anyway. I mean, it's kind of my baby in a way, since that riff that gets repeated over and over was my idea, like it came to me one night when I was practically asleep and I had to get up and run it over a bunch of times on my guitar so I'd remember it. And the other guys wanted to play it, too, even though some of them believed the feds. You know, like, 'Hey, what the fuck, all the *more* reason!' So I don't know what's going to happen. Wilbur has *no* strength of character at all. That's why he comes on like such a dictator, you know? He can't give and take—he's either totally rigid or a complete jellyfish. Once he gives in the littlest bit he just loses it. What a wimp! I bet Hitler was the same way. I mean, look how he caved in at the end, right? I've been reading Shirer's book about him. So anyway, you oughta come—just to see the fireworks. 'Cause, I mean, those guys weren't just goofin' around. If Wilbur decides to go with the band, the feds might just pop him, right there on the bandstand. And if Wilbur's coked up enough he might just do it."

Bran listened to all this with great interest.

"It must be a signal of some sort! A code! You're fouling up their communications!" He broke into prolonged laughter at the prospect.

Polly looked at the clock. "Maybe. I gotta go back now."

Bran watched her with unabashed delight as she rejoined the band for the next set.

"A highly intelligent young woman," he said approvingly.

I must have looked a little stunned. Intelligence wasn't the first attribute that popped into my mind on those blessedly rare occasions when I was exposed to Polly's motormouth delivery.

"You forget," he went on, "I see young people every day, just as

you do. Most of them don't know who fought on which side in World War II. And they're utterly incapable of relating anything they read to their own narrow experience."

"Look, I know times are hard, Bran darling, and the pool of civilized, literate humans is most assuredly shrinking day by day. But there's no call for precipitate despair."

He shook his head, smiling. "Henry Higgins was right. You're blinded by the language—the style. I'm shocked at you, Grace! It's just the rush of ideas, can't you see? Condensation. Think how long it would take one of those ponderous fools in Washington to impart the same body of information in a precise, linear fashion!"

He began to imitate a well-known cabinet member paraphrasing one of Polly's speeches in an interminable, stupefying monotone.

"Stop!" I begged. "Mercy! I yield! She's the very goddess of wisdom!"

But I was still uneasy about his nascent infatuation. "Shades of *The Blue Angel,*" I thought. Polly seemed so much younger than Helen had been. But then, didn't everyone nowadays? Was it misplaced loyalty to Helen, or genuine concern for Bran? He was just beginning to look human again after seven years of grieving, and I didn't want him to get hurt running after a purple mohawk. So I was very ambivalent and confused when he started pushing us to go to the concert—and delighted when Saturday came and it turned out we had something far more important to do.

Bran Has Enough

THE NEXT DAY, Friday, was the day of the thesis defense exam, which was to take place between ten and noon. Just before we left for the university Taylor called and said that he'd finally heard from Louise.

"Did you tell her you're coming here?"

"She said not to. Not till tonight. That I should check out of here and meet her at three in a parking lot on West Colfax. She said you should be there, too, but nobody else."

"You don't suppose Louise could be dealing?"

He ignored me. "She said she'd explain when we got there."

I was annoyed to find how pleased I was that she had surfaced again.

The exam for "The Incidence of One-Sex Religious Rituals in Fifth-Century Corinth: A Reinterpretation Based on Inscribed Shards from Site M37" was as tedious as those things always are.

The light cast on women's religious festivals by this handful of ambiguous shards and truncated inscriptions fell far short of the wattage generated by a sated and lethargic firefly at the close of the mating season. When my turn as inquisitor came around I was almost asleep.

An outside reader usually assumes one of two postures: the Intelligent Stranger, naïve to the field, who poses innocent general questions; or the Surprise Prosecutor, ambitious to prove to his colleagues that he knows more about the field than the doctoral candidate does. I took the former tack and asked him what I thought was a harmless warm-up question: What contribution his work might make to general knowledge?

The candidate looked as if I had struck him across the face with a riding crop. He turned helplessly to Bran and the other examiners in a silent plea for aid against the alien. Bran sighed. The others refused to alter their habitual necrophiliac expressions, thus signifying that, although they might not approve of so impertinent a question, I had not violated any club rules by asking it. I then rephrased my question in such a way as to suggest one or two possible avenues of response, and he leapt at these gratefully and gave a passable imitation of literate discourse, after which I hurriedly skipped over my more theoretical questions and concentrated on suggesting alternative ways of completing some of the unfinished sentences in his inscriptions—ways that were quite as plausible as those he had suggested and would lead to entirely different interpretations. His face shone with relief and gratitude, as if he were an ant suddenly furloughed from unwonted examination of the galaxies and permitted once again to pick through familiar bits of grain and seed. He defended his arbitrary inferences with a fair amount of skill against my equally arbitrary ones, and the questioning passed to the department chairperson, who proceeded to spend the final fifteen minutes of the defense pointing out some forty-seven errors in the format of the bibliography. These included such grotesque blunders as putting the date of an article before the issue number, failing to capitalize properly, and using the wrong abbreviation for a journal, such as *Jnl. Hell. Stud.* instead of *J. Hellen. Stud.*

Finally it was over. When the candidate had been passed unanimously we all went to lunch and shared complaints about the con-

comitant decline in university budgets and student intelligence. For, as Bran is fond of pointing out, it takes a genius to teach a fool; a wise man can be taught by anyone.

On our way back to Bran's office we met one of his colleagues in the corridor. He introduced himself as Grant Popper and eagerly invited us into his office to see his new computer terminal. Stacks of printout were piled up all over the room, completely intimidating a small, pathetic cluster of books, mostly technical manuals. Popper was some kind of sociologist, one of those overly permissive researchers who beget masses of data and then allow them to loll about in the files all day without ever once subjecting them to the harsh but character-building influence of a single idea. But he quickly demonstrated his catholicity by asking me politely what my fields were and then citing references in each. We flung names at each other for a few minutes until it became clear that it would never evolve into any kind of intellectual exchange, at which point I broke it off, saying that in fact I was taking a vacation at the moment and my only real interest was in enjoying my leisure and having a good time.

A few minutes later he burst triumphantly into Bran's office and handed me a page of printout with several dozen books and articles listed on it. Glancing over it, I saw some titles that referred to national parks and others that seemed to be about various sports; skiing, boating, and so on. I looked at him in bewilderment. He pointed and nodded encouragingly.

"I tapped the computer for some references in your field!" he said, proudly.

"My field?"

"You said you were developing an interest in the sociology of leisure."

I thanked him, and for months afterward he continued to mail me lists of references.

I was beginning to realize how glad I was to be away from the university, and some of my jaundiced attitude was starting to rub off on Bran. When he opened his mail a moment later there were two memos from the chairperson of the department, whom we had just seen at lunch. The first opened with that time-honored necrophiliac phrase: "It has come to my attention . . ." and had to do with a teaching assistant of Bran's who had given out an office phone num-

ber for some incoming personal calls. The second was a three-page, single-spaced vitriolic rebuttal to some comments Bran had made in a faculty senate meeting. Bran tore them up in a rage, a lock of his thin, straight, black hair falling over his eyes.

"What is *wrong* with these people? I had *lunch* with the man! We were chatting away amiably for an hour! And he said absolutely nothing about any of this! Why must everything go into a memo? Can't he *talk* to me about it? Does he have a speech impediment? And doesn't he have anything better to think about than *this!* Three pages on whether we should have a 13.5-credit science requirement or a 12.0! Who on earth cares? Is this furthering the acquisition of wisdom? What are we doing here? Breeding *idiots!* It's an idiot-breeding ground! Idiots training idiots to work for other idiots! I'm getting out! Enough is enough!"

He picked up the rest of his mail, threw it around the office, kicked a pile of books into the corner, and stalked out of the room, with me running along behind. On the way home in the car he announced that he was never going back, that he was through with university life, that he was going to devote his declining years to mastering some honest trade like carpentry, and so on. I resisted the temptation to point out that it was the end of the school year anyway and there was no reason for him to go back to Magwich for at least two months except to pick up mail. He was having such a good time "quitting" I didn't want to spoil it. But before the summer was over I was very grateful for that day and the receptive mood it had put him in for what was to come.

Hot Water

I MADE A lot of progress during my two days in the hotel room alone, away from Grace. I got so I could "go out" almost at will, within five or ten minutes, and I began to venture farther. Walls were no barrier; I could go anywhere I wanted. The only problem was that I didn't have much control over the wants. Before I even realized what they were I had already acted on them.

One day I had the urge to see Grace, and in an instant there I was, flying over Brandon's garden. I sat (that's what it seemed like) in a tree, next to a self-consciously operatic little bird, and watched Grace curled up on her lawn chair, sleeping. A large bound manuscript had slipped from her hand and fallen on the ground open-end-down so that it make a little A-frame with some of the pages curled. Brandon's calico cat was sprawled on her shoulder, nose to nose, with one hind leg draped down, resting on her breast. Seeing Grace look so vulnerable did funny things to me, and before I realized what was

happening I found myself hovering right up next to her, emulating the cat. The cat thereupon lifted its head lazily and sneezed, which woke Grace up. Embarrassed, I felt myself "schloop" back into my body.

Distance meant nothing. Although if I wanted to I could fly along like a bird and watch the landscape go by, I could also go instantaneously from one place to another. The night we saw Polly at the Mountain Gorilla, for example, I was having trouble sleeping—worrying about why Louise hadn't called—and I guess the urge to see her took over. In a second I was out of my body and in a small, dark, first-floor room, unfurnished except for a rug, a sofa-bed shoved against one wall, and a small maple end table with a fat china lamp on it. Seated cross-legged in a circle were six women, including Louise—mostly Native American and varying in age from about fifty to what looked like eternity—eyes closed, chanting something softly in a language I didn't understand.

As soon as I came into the room, Louise opened her eyes, frowned, lifted her arms, and muttered something. Right away the other women opened their eyes, scowled horribly at me, and threw up their arms, too. I bumped against something, like a bird crashing into a plate-glass window, and felt myself sliding backward. The next minute they all disappeared, and I realized I'd been sucked back into my body against my will. I felt like one of those hapless heroes of legend who stumbles inadvertently into some sacred precinct and pays for it the rest of his life. I was scared, ashamed, humiliated, and resentful. If Louise didn't want me barging into her coven, or whatever it was, she shouldn't have taught me how. I didn't get to sleep for a long time, and when I did I had troubled dreams.

I slept late and the phone woke me. It was Louise, telling me to meet her at a parking lot that afternoon and to bring Grace. I said I would and then grudgingly began to apologize.

"What for?" she asked.

"Barging into your . . . meeting. Ceremony."

She chuckled. "You're gettin' pretty good."

"Good at what?" I wondered. I asked her about the alchemist dream and the trumpets, but she just said not to push myself and to take things as they came. That I had a tendency to rush things and it wouldn't help. Then she said good-bye and hung up.

Checkout time at the hotel was at noon, which left me three hours to kill before meeting them at the parking lot. I didn't know what to do with myself. Grace and Brandon were at the university and Louise had told me not to go to the house yet. After my last effort I wasn't in the mood for out-of-the-body explorations, and anyway I didn't have any place to lie down. I didn't feel like reading or going to a movie or a museum—my mind was in too much turmoil to concentrate on anything.

I threw my stuff in the trunk of the Coupe and just stood there a while, paralyzed. Then I got in and started driving gloomily around the city, wondering what Louise had meant about rushing things and what that had to do with the dreams. Without noticing where I was going, just trying to avoid traffic, I found myself heading east out of the city. After a while I got on a freeway and the steady motion seemed to lend a kind of illusory regularity and structure to my disordered thoughts. I was definitely feeling better when something in the periphery of my vision jarred my consciousness with a little nudge of fear and unpleasantness.

I looked around and a house in a nearby field came into focus. A classic New England saltbox—white clapboard with dark green shutters—except for its front door with the delicate gold trim and the fluted pilasters. Even though I'd only seen it once in my life, in the dark, and in a rainstorm, my stomach recognized it instantly as Sneath's house, sitting innocently in a field, under a tall tree, as if it had been there forever. Could there be more than one?

I turned off at the next exit and worked my way over to it. There was a dirt road leading right up to the front door rather than to the side, which seemed odd to me at the time. I still don't know what possessed me to investigate. Normally I'm pretty much of a coward. The house was fascinating to me, like a violent death on a city street.

I parked the car in the drive and knocked at the door, but there was no answer. I walked around to the back, where there was an attached shed that I didn't remember being on Sneath's house. I couldn't feel completely certain about anything because I couldn't recall any details about the outside of the house that would have made it unique. I tried to look inside, but it was raised up enough (with some kind of latticework covering the foundation, or the lack thereof) so I couldn't see in the windows. I thought I saw a way of

climbing up onto the shed and was about to do so when I heard a faint barking. Turning to the fields behind the house, I saw in the distance a tall, elegant, skinny figure emerge from the woods carrying a rifle. He was too far away for me to tell whether it was Sneath or not, and I wasn't inclined to wait and see, for racing toward me, making wavy dark ribbons through the tall grass and barking furiously, were two large scary-looking dogs. I jumped into the car and turned on the ignition. Nothing happened.

I looked helplessly at the rapidly approaching dogs and rolled up my window—a futile gesture since the top was down. I tried the engine again. Nothing. The dogs were about fifty yards off when I saw the man raise his rifle and point it directly at me. There was a sudden sharp sound, and I flinched and ducked.

But the sound was the engine starting. In my panic I'd turned the key again without realizing it and the ignition had finally caught. Which gives you a rough idea how uncoordinated I can get in a tight spot. But I managed to throw the car into gear and lurch out the drive just as the dogs came leaping and snarling out of the tall grass. The man with the gun, meanwhile, had lowered it the moment the car started, as if his only objective had been to scare me out of there. I had the weirdest feeling, in fact, that he had somehow started the car with his rifle. I felt as if he was laughing at me, even though he was too far away for me to see his face. In the rearview mirror I could see the dogs jumping in the air, frolicking with each other and licking one another's faces. They looked like they were laughing at me, too. One of them actually stood on his hind legs and walked several steps toward me, waving both his front paws up and down in a mocking farewell as I pulled out onto the main road.

The whole experience gave me a creepy, déjà-vu feeling, like a dream. When I had my breakdown the line between dreaming and waking got very blurry, and I wondered if it was happening again. I had to work so hard convincing myself it wasn't, I took a wrong turn on the freeway and barely made it back to town on time.

Louise was already at the parking lot with a lanky woman I recognized as the youngest of the chanters I had seen the night before. They were standing by the pickup, and Louise motioned me to park

some distance away, next to an open white Porsche. She then walked me back to the pickup and introduced me to the lanky woman, who she called Collie. That's what it sounded like, anyway. Grace insists that it ought to be spelled K-a-l-i, but Grace always likes to make things exotic. Collie looked more Irish than anything else, with blue eyes and long black hair streaked with gray, but I could imagine her having some Native American blood. She wore battered jeans and a blue work-shirt with a red kerchief around her neck. Grabbing a bag out of the truck, she walked over to the Coupe and proceeded to search it inside and out. At that moment Grace arrived on foot and was about to assault Collie for monkeying with her car when Louise intercepted her and, putting her finger to her lips, mouthed a silent introduction. Collie nodded, still busy combing the interior with some device I couldn't identify. Then she grunted, reached under the front seat, and very slowly and gently brought out two small metal objects. She looked at Louise, who pointed to the white Porsche. Whereupon Collie casually leaned over and slipped the objects, which were obviously bugs of some sort, under the Porsche's front seat. Louise then whispered to us to meet her at a park a mile or two away and drove off.

Grace and I got in the Coupe to follow, and pulled out just in time to see a handsome but rather pompous-looking young man in an elegant three-piece suit walk briskly up to the Porsche, brush a speck of dirt off it, check his watch, lay his attaché case carefully in the back, and drive off. Grace was vastly entertained by the thought that this impeccable Yuppie was soon to be carefully monitored by whoever had been monitoring us. But our amusement curdled as it began to sink in that someone *had* been monitoring us. Who was following us? Had people been listening? What had we said?

When we got to the park Louise was alone, sitting on the grass with Barghest. We started peppering her with questions, most of which she shrugged off. But Grace isn't that easily discouraged.

"Come on, Louise! We've been flying blind long enough! If someone's following us, I want to know what it's about! And if we've got enemies, I want to know who they are!"

"Deadmen," Louise answered, patting Barghest, who seemed a little disturbed by Grace's anger.

"*Which* deadmen?"

"I don't know." Then she grinned slyly. "Maybe tonight smokum loco weed, go long journey, ask Great Spirit!"

Grace was building up magma again so I jumped in.

"When did they put those bugs in?"

"When's the last time somebody was in your car?"

"Sneath," I said. "Sneath was in the car. But why two?"

"You're gettin' popular, children," Louise said, grinning. "Folks gettin' sick o' TV. Thought ratings'd go way up after I was on—"

"The cop," Grace interrupted. "The cop put his hand under the seat. Jesus Christ! We've got cops after us!"

Louise shook her head.

"He wasn't a cop."

"He had a pretty convincing disguise!"

"That's right." Louise turned serious and took our hands. "Look, children, I told you when we started you'd have to take my word for things. It can't be done any other way. If you want out, tell me right now. Don't wait. We got important work to do tomorrow. If it doesn't get done, nothin' else's gonna matter. We got enemies—plenty of 'em. We got friends, too. But I gotta know if I can count on you. Are you in or out?"

"I'm in," I said.

Grace looked pained. "Usually when I say I'm in or out I have some vague notion what the game is."

Louise shook her head.

"Can't do that this time, Captain. It's a new game: Blind Trust." She smiled. "Have to either trust *his* instinct—old crazy fella here—or *my* pretty face, or nothin'."

"Great choice."

"Make it now."

"Don't crowd me."

"I got to."

Grace sighed. "What can I say? You've appealed to my deep suicidal impulses. I'm in."

Louise nodded approvingly.

"Okay. Under your seat there's a map. Tomorrow morning go where it says. Just the two of you. Take the Gormanizers. Be there by 1:00 P.M. and wait. The minute you see anything or hear anything

that ain't right, fire away, and don't stop till it's gone." She paused for a minute. "You got all that?"

I nodded. "What will you do with the other six?"

"Like I said," Louise smiled, "we got friends."

"And what if cops stop us, or fake cops?" Grace asked.

"You tell 'em you're tourists. Ain't you?"

"What if they don't believe us? Whoever had those bugs planted won't!"

Louise grinned. "If they put you on the rack, just send 'em to Louise Falling Bear. She's the mastermind, right?" She started to laugh. "Mr. Big!" She was so delighted by this image, she couldn't stop for quite a while. "You were just doin' a favor for Louise. She didn't tell you why."

I realized she was keeping us in the dark to protect us, and I think Grace did, too, but she wasn't quite ready to let go yet.

"It would help," she persisted, "if we knew who our enemies were. Why we're being bugged . . . and drugged—"

"The house!" I broke in, remembering. "I just saw Sneath's house! At least . . . I *think* it was."

When I told them, Grace was ready to jump in the car and go back there. Louise stopped us.

"Please." Her use of the word shocked me. "Don't do it. Wait till tomorrow. Don't do nothin' that would get you in trouble, keep you from bein' there. After tomorrow you do what you want."

Grace stared at her. "I've never done anything this crazy in my life. If I'm wrong. . . ."

Louise grinned.

"I'd never cross you, Captain. You might hurt me."

"You bet I would."

The Big Day

DESPITE LOUISE'S EXPLICIT instructions, it was hard for Grace to resist asking Brandon to come along, especially when he'd been so hospitable and kind to us. But luckily he was completely hooked on going to the Crushed Nuts concert, and his only problem was that we weren't going, too. He was nervous about being conspicuous.

"I shall be Gulliver in the land of Lilliput," he said uneasily. "I need some sort of disguise."

"How about an acne mask?" Grace suggested. She kissed him. "Just think of yourself as an ethnographer and pretend you're in New Guinea or something."

According to the map Louise had left us, we were to drive about a hundred fifty miles east on a series of progressively smaller roads. When we had done so we found ourselves on a rolling prairie,

devoid of trees, indistinguishable from the pallid Kansas landscape that drove Dorothy Gale to take repeated furloughs in the Land of Oz. We turned off onto a dirt road that ran along a high link fence for almost twenty miles—sometimes close, sometimes a half mile or more away. There was nothing else around to break the monotony of wheat fields and plowed earth. The fence had a lot of signs on it saying U.S. GOVERNMENT—KEEP OUT and other remarks to that effect.

Just before the road veered off from the fence, there was a little knoll with an abandoned barn in a state of imminent collapse. Following Louise's instructions, we drove the car into the barn and got out. We were a little anxious about the barn's stability, but it looked a lot better inside than out. We climbed up into the loft, where a large number of missing boards allowed us a good view in all directions. The fence was to the southeast, and to the southwest we could see, a mile or so away, a farmhouse with a barn and a few outbuildings. Otherwise there was nothing but the flat, rolling plain. In the distance, beyond the fence and to the south, we could hear a radio playing and dimly recognized the one Crushed Nuts song we knew: "Under My Boot." We got out some fruit and sandwiches that Brandon had fixed for us and had lunch, amusing ourselves with the image of Bran standing in the hot sun with twenty thousand teenagers.

Since the roof had miraculously remained more intact than the siding, the barn provided both shade and breeze; its charms were in fact not unknown to local inhabitants, judging by the wrappers and bottles scattered around. But it was completely quiet at present except for crickets, a few birds, and the distant radio that now captured Grace's attention.

"What does it say about us, Taylor, that we're beginning to be able to recognize this garbage?"

"We've entered the mainstream," I suggested mildly.

"Do you remember when you were a kid and thought opera singers sounded bizarre?"

"And artificial, with all that vibrato!"

"Can you imagine what people fifty years from now will think about rock? That there was this peculiar period in history when people thought the natural way to sing was to make your voice all

broken and raspy, and yell and shriek and have a temper tantrum? I mean just listen to this as if you'd never heard it before. You'd think those guys were really freaked out about something. You'd never guess they were singing."

"There was a guy on my ward who used to do this all day long until they drugged him up. Then he just sat and twitched. I never could decide which was worse." I listened for a minute. "What I never could understand is why you have to yell into a mike."

"I think screaming is our national song," Grace decided.

I thought about that. "Oriental music always seemed to me to be more like whining. But they don't drink so much coffee."

Grace shook her head. "No go. Country-and-western music whines a lot, too, and you can't say they don't pack away the java." She paused. "When you get right down to it, complaining is an important component of most music. I'll bet seventy-five percent of all popular lyrics the world over are devoted to kvetching about something or other. The only unique thing about rock is that the kvetching is more hysterical."

Grace's anthropological musings were cut short by the sound of what turned out to be a three-quarter-ton pickup coming up the road from the southwest and heading for the farmhouse. In the truck were two men in their late twenties, dressed in jeans, cowboy boots, and baseball hats. One let fly with an empty beer can just before they turned into the farm, but once they had pulled up and got their feet on dry land they were all business. With a determined air suitable to men who have a difficult and nasty piece of work to do, they marched gravely over to a little tree—more of a bush actually, for although it was almost ten feet high and the tallest growing thing for a radius of ten or twelve miles, the largest of its several stalks could not have been more than two inches in diameter.

They walked around it a few times, pointing and gesturing, apparently planning their mode of attack. (They were too far away for us to hear them, except for occasional exclamations.) Finally one of them slapped the other on the shoulder, as if to say, "Let's get to work!" and they marched back to the truck, where each picked up an enormous chainsaw and proceeded to attack the offending bush, reducing it in a matter of minutes to a tiny pile of sticks and leaves.

Opening a brace of beers, they contemplated the fruits of their

manly labors for a few moments in silence. Then, apparently recollecting themselves—perhaps remembering other challenges that still lay ahead—they climbed into the truck and drove off toward the westering sun.

We had scarcely had time to recover from this little drama when we heard an odd rumbling to the southeast. At the same time, we became aware of an insistent rhythm carried by the radio of the departing truck and picked up, as the latter receded, by the distant radio we had heard when we first came. It was accompanied by an oddly irritating, endlessly repeated musical phrase, which Grace somehow recognized, from Polly's muttered rendering of it Thursday night, as the infamous instrumental, "Pus Bus." We had just had time to realize that what we were hearing was a live broadcast of the outdoor concert, where Wilbur had apparently absorbed enough cocaine to brave the feds, when the rumbling began to increase in volume, overwhelming the music completely—a deafening roar. We spun around to see, a few miles to the east, the head of a giant rocket appearing above the ground and rising with increasing speed. We aimed our Gormanizers in unison, but without effect. The missile—for by now it was obvious that we were next to a launching silo—was too far away for us to tell whether the Gormanizers' concentrated beam was on target or not.

As the missile rose farther into the air the enormity of the situation sank in, and we both struggled desperately to zero in on our target. This took the form of making wilder and wilder circular sweeps—I guess in the hope that we might hit randomly what we had failed to hit by design. But nothing seemed to be working. The missile rose higher and higher and started to tilt slightly off the vertical plane. It looked to be getting out of range, although what the range of our ridiculous instruments might be we could only imagine—Louise had never told us. All we knew was that we didn't dare stop aiming as long as the missile was in sight. We were both sweating furiously in our frenzied attempt to stop it before it disappeared.

Then, suddenly, it happened. The missile abruptly changed course and began to fly in a wide circle, more or less horizontally. As we watched, it began lurching crazily in all directions, flying in ever smaller, lower, and more eccentric circles, like a balloon when you

blow it up and let go without tying it—up, down, around, and finally falling with a thunderous crash across the wire fence less than a hundred yards away, mashing the fence down as if it were made of yarn and pointing its nose directly at us. The barn shuddered resentfully with the impact, and a number of boards became dislodged. Grace and I raced down the ladder and jumped in the car, frantic to be out of the listing barn. And, indeed, as Grace pulled out, it gave a final groan and a wheeze and flopped slowly over on its side like a drowsy lion, sending great spirals of dust into the clear air. We looked back at the fence as we roared away, half expecting, I think, that nothing would be there. I for one was certain I had hallucinated the whole thing. But there it was, lying dementedly across the mangled fence, immense and out of place—a fecal embarrassment.

Grace was apparently convinced that we should make every effort to dissociate ourselves from the event as quickly as possible, and we covered the twenty miles of dirt road in barely as many minutes. Fortunately the road was flat and well maintained, but even so the Coupe de Grace had its shock absorbers severely tested. As an escape strategy speed was of doubtful value since the cloud of dust we raised could be seen for miles, but my anxiety to be away from the scene was as intense as hers, and I made no protest. We were both greatly relieved to reach paved roads, and after another twenty miles, since no one seemed at all interested in us, we began to settle down and breathe easier. The result was that we both got the shakes so badly Grace had to pull the car over and stop till we could recover. When she got her hands under control again she looked at me and smiled.

"Well, you wanted to save the world, children," she grunted, in an unexpectedly deft imitation of Louise's voice. It obviously shocked her that Louise had correctly anticipated this humungous disaster and averted it.

"How did we get *into* this?" she said wonderingly in her own voice. But I could tell she was elated. I was, too. It was the first time in my life that I'd ever actually *done* anything. I mean, about the things that matter. The things that make you feel powerless. It was like years and years of teeth-gritting helplessness rolling off me like an old snakeskin. We started laughing hysterically and talking very loud. Wondering why the missile had fired, how Louise had known

it would, whether there were others, whether the Russians had known how close they were to disaster, what the U.S. government would do about the accident, and how much trouble we were in. I don't think we listened much to what we were saying or that we really appreciated the gravity of it. Nor did it occur to us that our adventures might be far from over.

Casualties

WHEN GRACE AND I got to the outskirts of town almost three hours later, we were still pretty high. Everything had happened so fast that by the time our adrenalin really got going it was all over. We tried to channel some of our excess energy into solving the many mysteries besetting us—like how Louise knew about the missile in advance and who all these people were who had become so curious about our activities. But we were too hyped up to follow any line of thought for more than a step or two in any direction.

The most puzzling of all was Sneath. He couldn't be tied to Louise, because when he first appeared we hadn't even met Louise yet. Where had he come from, and why?

"Let's have another look at that house!" Grace said impulsively.

I hesitated. We'd already had a lot for one day.

"It's the only thread we've got hold of," she insisted. "We've done Louise's errand. It's time we took care of our own business!"

We were only a few miles away, but I made her take a route that was a little bit roundabout so I could retrace my path exactly. It's a good thing I did, too, because when we got to the spot where I'd seen the house, there was a large empty space.

"Are you sure it was here?"

"I *thought* it was here! That's the tree. And that's the field where the dogs were!"

Grace pulled into the drive and we got out. The only thing left of the house was the shed at the back, which was missing one side where it had been attached. As we walked around I began to piece it together. There was a rectangular hole where the drive ended, extending to the shed. Sneath, if it *was* Sneath, had just driven the house in so that the shed covered up the cab, and then he'd thrown up the latticework to cover the wheels. When it was time to move on it couldn't have taken him more than fifteen minutes to pull down the latticework and leave.

We prowled around the place for a while but couldn't find anything to enlighten us so we drove home.

Bran was already back with a story of his own to tell, but we were so full of our exploits that it was a long while before he got to tell it. When we had finished he looked embarrassed.

"If this is true," he said (and I could see it wasn't a foregone conclusion), "you're fortunate to be alive!" He frowned. "I'd like to meet this Louise person."

"Count your blessings you don't have to," Grace said, but with less rancor than usual.

"Well, I had a small adventure of my own," Bran went on, since he had no idea what to make of our story or how to respond. "Nothing to compare with yours, of course. . . ."

We waited politely.

"I've always been interested in popular culture, you know, but actually this was my first rock concert. . . ." He hesitated. "Are they always so violent?"

"Violent? Like what?"

"Like rioting and police and all that sort of thing. I was quite nearly trampled to death!"

Seeing he had captured our interest, he eased back.

"At first everything was lovely. There were thousands of rather strange-looking people, but they were quite orderly. The band played, everyone jumped up and down, everything was . . . *normal,* I should think. The band was sweating, *we* were sweating, someone fainted, paramedics came—quite smooth, really. Polly was magnificent, and the crowd loved her! Definitely the best part of the show. Then, when the concert was almost over, this boy, Wilbur—looking very . . . full of himself, like a rooster—comes up to announce the penultimate number. He says, 'Look here, they don't want us to play this song, so I'm asking you: What about it?' Meanwhile the rhythm section has already started the beat. It was this 'Pus Bus.' By now, of course, the crowd's screaming, 'Yes! Yes! Play it!' And then they started to play. A few moments later these four men dressed like technicians ran toward the equipment, yanking out wires and plugs, one after another! Until finally there was no sound. The crowd became enraged! Some of them couldn't see what had happened. They were shouting, 'Sound! Sound!' and clapping and stamping in rhythm. Others were attacking the technicians—chasing and beating them. Complete confusion! Finally the police came. They tried to disperse the crowd, but the kids were furious. They felt cheated. They attacked the police with rocks and sticks, overturned cars, set fires. . . . The police brought in riot squads, there was tear gas—I was lucky to get away in one piece!"

Grace, who had been looking a little blank, suddenly lit up. "Joshua!"

I looked at her in surprise. "What?"

"Joshua! Don't you remember?"

"He 'fit' the battle of Jericho. I remember that."

"They blew trumpets and shouted, and the walls fell down!"

Bran was baffled. So was I.

"Project Joshua! Don't you remember? The feds were talking about Project Joshua. They didn't want the band to play 'Pus Bus.'"

She looked at us as if this somehow explained everything, but we still weren't tuning in and said so.

"They were playing it when the missile went off. Remember? We could hear it on that radio, which must have been right by the silo!

They're doing something with sound—using it to fire the missiles. 'Pus Bus' triggered the missile! That aggravating phrase was an automatic signal!"

Brian nodded, slowly. "Vibration frequencies. Easy to code—"

"No!" I objected. "It's too . . . *stupid!*"

"It *was* stupid! Look what happened! Louise must have known about it somehow!"

I felt cold slither down my back. If Grace was right, our feeble motions with those absurd gadgets in the fur booties were all that had stood in the way of a nuclear holocaust. I refused to believe it. It was too silly, too impossibly chancy.

That night we kept both radio and TV turned on, trying to find out more about what had happened. The first news broadcast mentioned only the concert:

> A rock concert by the band Crushed Nuts got out of hand today when the sound equipment failed, and disgruntled fans stormed the stage. Thirty-seven people were injured in the ensuing riot, two of them seriously, before police were able to disperse the disappointed crowd.

Later in the evening there was a special bulletin:

> Police telephones have been swamped since late this afternoon answering queries about an alleged missile launching from two Colorado silos. Government spokesmen denied the rumors and assured the public that there is no danger and no missiles have been launched.

A little later this was followed by another broadcast saying that a number of people had reported seeing the missiles both in the air and on the ground. Finally, at ten, a new bulletin was issued.

> Government spokesmen now acknowledge that two missiles were accidentally launched from silos in Colorado. Both launchings were immediately aborted, however, by a pre-arranged fail-safe mechanism. The spokesmen emphasized that at no time

was there any risk of nuclear war, nor was the public in any danger. Several senators have called for an investigation of the incident.

Next came a frantic phone call from Polly, who asked us to pick her up at a phone booth about twenty minutes away. She sounded upset and frightened, and we said we'd come immediately.

I feel a little embarrassed to say it, but by this time Grace and I were quite depressed at the thought that we might not have had anything to do with the aborting of the missiles. We hadn't even seen the second missile so we could hardly take credit for that. We should have felt relieved that the safety of the world didn't depend, after all, on the accuracy of two inexperienced Gormanizer operators, but it kind of took the wind out of our sails.

We didn't see Polly at first. The phone booths were empty, and the gas station where they were located was completely dark. It wasn't until we had actually stopped and gotten out of the car to look around that Polly emerged from the shadows and came running over.

"Quick! Get me out of here!"

She was shaking as we drove away. Grace put her arm around her and tried to comfort her. She kept looking out the rear window and wouldn't relax until we were several blocks away.

"Wilbur's dead. The whole band. Someone blew up the van . . . everything. They're all dead. All except me! And now they're looking for *me!*"

The story came out all helter-skelter. It began with a police call to the house of Female Energy. Someone had reported an explosion on an isolated road in the mountains, and the highway patrol, investigating, had discovered the huge van still smoldering and completely gutted, with five bodies inside burned beyond recognition. The police recognized the van, however, and checked the motel where the band was staying but discovered that all the rooms had been emptied. The only thing they found, scribbled on a lampshade, was Polly's number, which they promptly called.

"Wilbur had dropped me off and I was just kind of crashing there in my room. And then Donna came home—she's the bass player? And she didn't know I was there. So when the phone rang we both

picked it up, I mean, I was on the extension, but I was kind of asleep, you know? So she answered and I didn't, and I heard the whole thing. So I got my stuff together and just left. I told Donna to consider me dead 'cause if she told anyone I wasn't, I probably would be. And then, just before I left, somebody else called for me. A man! So I ran out, got a cab, and went to the place where I called you."

Bran looked embarrassed.

"This second call . . . about what time was it?"

"I don't know, around ten-thirty?"

"I'm afraid I'm the guilty one. I called to congratulate you on your performance."

"Christ! You scared the living shit out of me, you know that? I figured they found out I wasn't in the van and were looking for me!" She started to cry. "Jesus! Those guys are dead! I mean, shit! Wilbur was a pig and everything, but shit! They're all *dead!* I could've been dead, too! What the fuck is *happening!*"

We took her home and Bran fed her heated cognac and we let her talk, stopping her only to check relevant news broadcasts and to tell our own story, which did nothing to reduce her anxiety.

On the tube, controversy continued to rage over the missile accident, with the government stoutly maintaining that there had never been any real danger, and the opposition arguing that an accidental launching was completely unacceptable, aborted or not. The Russians had responded with predictable outrage, and we realized with a sinking feeling that the net result of the accident would probably be to make both sides more trigger-happy than before.

At eleven-thirty the strange silence about the band was finally broken:

> The charred bodies of five members of Crushed Nuts were discovered today less than two hours after their concert was interrupted by violence following an equipment failure. The van in which the bodies were found was completely gutted by fire, apparently caused by napalm. Police believe the murders are drug-related.

This provoked a bitter laugh from Polly. "Well, you know, they're

right about that! If Wilbur hadn't snorted so goddamn much coke during the concert, he never would have had the guts to play that number. I mean, he was scared! I was sure he was going to chicken out. And then this guy shows up with this unbelievable coke! And Wilbur went completely nuts, I mean we practically had to rolf his upper lip so he could move it enough to sing." She stopped, thoughtful. "It was weird."

"What was weird?"

"That guy said he'd been sent by Kevin. Kevin's the guy who usually supplies us, although I have to say he never sold us anything that good! So Kevin calls up an hour later—you know, I forgot about it, so much has happened—his car broke down and he was real apologetic. I mean Kevin's pretty reliable and he knows a big concert like this you need a little hit, even people like me who don't do drugs that much, and he felt really bad he was letting us down in our hour of need and all, so he was glad somebody rescued us . . . but he was kind of weirded-out that this guy showed up using his name and he didn't even know who the guy was."

Grace suddenly lost the glazed look she gets when Polly talks a lot. "What did he look like? This other guy?"

"He was strange! He didn't look like somebody who would be dealing coke. He was real old, like in his fifties, tall, and real skinny, with a little thin mustache. And he was smiling the whole time. Like there was something funny he knew and you didn't. . . . I guess maybe there was."

Disaster

THE DAY AFTER Taylor and I were supposedly saving the world I slept late. We'd been up till 3:00 A.M. with Polly, and I woke up feeling stupid, miserable, and homesick. I crept downstairs and called Athene, which made me feel worse. She'd gotten a cold since I'd talked to her earlier in the week and sounded a little sad and was obviously missing me and the feeling was mutual. Her father, as usual, was being an asshole about her—letting fall, in his inimitably passive way, little hints of misadventure, affliction, calamity, and blight in her young life, and then refusing to commit himself, when I probed further, as to whether they were real or not, or to consider possible remedies. (Waite, I should tell you, is one of those cute, boyish, curly-haired, brown-eyed guys—the kind you never know whether to go to bed with or change their diapers. They make very good fathers for about an hour and a half, max.)

I was so low I called Peter and apologized for yelling at him. He said it was okay, that he'd just decided I must be having my period, which almost started the fight all over again. He said his paper on social change was coming along splendidly—that he had synthesized Marx and Weber and made a complete reinterpretation of the onset of the Industrial Revolution. I congratulated him and crept back upstairs again.

We had persuaded Polly to spend the night at Bran's, much to the latter's delight, and she woke up in considerably better spirits, having slept the untroubled sleep of the very young and recently rescued. (Her gain was my loss, since I had to share my bed. Men are so stuffy about sleeping together.)

"You all right?" I asked her, unwilling to believe that a recovery that dramatic could be genuine.

"Oh, yeah, really! This house is like an oasis. I mean, I feel really safe here! Like a sanctuary?" She stretched prettily. "I feel like one of those Greek-type heroes that throw themselves on the mercy of the temple guardians!" She flung herself prostrate on the bed by way of illustration. I was beginning to like her. She had some okay routines.

I had no illusions that "this house" meant just Taylor and me, although she did seem to feel comfortable with us. But it was Bran the Protector who created the "oasis," discreetly anticipating Polly's every need and captivating her with small, exquisitely timed attentions.

"Isn't he cute? I feel like a fucking princess!" she confided after he'd brought her some herb tea to help her sleep.

"That's the idea," I thought, but I kept it to myself. I still had mixed feelings about the whole thing. It was good to see Bran interested in a woman again but I couldn't see any future for him with Polly. Besides getting low scores on the appropriateness test, she didn't seem to know or care who Bran really was. She was just flattered and attracted, lapping up all his delicate little gallantries like a starving anteater.

Breakfast was a study in contrasts: Bran and Polly chirping emetically and stuffing themselves with cholesterol; Taylor and I balefully sipping coffee and tossing in the odd grunt. Afterward we sprawled around Bran's living room and spent the afternoon reading the Sunday papers (which had very little to add about Saturday's events).

Bran was poring over the local movie section. "Aha! Our recreational dilemma has been solved!"

"I didn't know we had one."

"For this evening! *Die Dreigroschenoper* is playing at the Art Theater." He turned to Polly. "Have you ever heard Lotte Lenya sing?"

"Who?"

"You have a treat in store!"

Obviously he saw this as a way to establish more common ground with Polly, since he knew she'd read a book on Hitler and had probably heard some of the songs. He could turn her on to Lenya, explain how the film portrayed the coalition of political forces that brought Hitler to prominence, and probably expatiate on his pet theory that New Wave music was just a rehashing of Brecht and Weill bred from the same pre-fascist conditions.

Taylor and I were unenthusiastic about the idea but before we had a chance to say so Louise called. She congratulated us, and when Taylor said he didn't think we'd done anything she said, "Well, somebody sure did!" and went into her cackling number. She said she was going back to California the next day and wanted to pick up the Gormanizers. We made a date to meet her at the parking lot.

When we got back to the living room there were signs of friction. Polly was scared to leave the house.

"I don't know who's waiting out there, lurking."

"But I'll be with you," Bran assured her. "We all will."

"When I leave, I want to leave *town*. Totally. In a couple of days, when I'm not so scared. I don't want to go out now."

But once Bran gets a pleasant image in his head he has a hard time letting go of it. He saw this as a fun outing—an early movie followed by dinner in what he claimed to be Denver's best Szechwan restaurant, right next to the theater—as well as a chance to show himself off to good advantage. Gone was yesterday's patient sensitivity; this was knight determined to impress fair maiden even if he had to drag her through a poisonous swamp to do it.

It was a near-fatal error and Taylor and I unwittingly compounded it, for as soon as Polly heard we were going to meet Louise, she capitulated immediately. She didn't want to be alone, and although Bran would have stayed home with her if she'd insisted, she felt too insecure to buck her principal protector without us nearby.

We said we'd join them at the movie and not to worry if we were late, since we'd seen it. I blush to admit we even helped assure Polly she'd be safe there.

I parked in front of the theater, and Taylor and I left them there while we walked to our rendezvous point with Louise, which was only a few blocks away. We were carrying the Gormanizers in a canvas bag and I was really looking forward to getting rid of them and putting a period to this whole silly episode in my life. I don't know what Taylor was feeling as he trudged along beside me. Sometimes he acts like a kid being taken on a trip—waiting patiently to see what's coming next as if his life were a movie or something.

If it was, the pace picked up right then. When we got to the parking lot we saw Louise's pickup just coming into view. She must have seen us because she slowed down to turn in, but just as we waved and started toward the entrance to the lot she gunned the motor and took off around the corner—completely ignoring us as we waved and shouted frantically. Before we had time to puzzle over this I felt something very much like a gun in my back and the bag was jerked from my hand. At the same moment a small black van pulled up abruptly in front of us, screening us from the street.

"Get in." The voice was cold, disinterested.

I saw that Taylor also had armed company. We got in.

Inside the van there were two more men, in addition to the driver. They all looked studiously grim and no one said anything. The van was full of electronic equipment but I never got to see much of it because the men immediately bound, gagged, and blindfolded us. I was so stunned by the speed of it all I didn't even have time to be scared. They were very efficient.

We drove around for ten minutes in complete silence. I wondered if they were writing notes or communicating with signs. Or just sitting there doing their Clint Eastwood impressions. I occupied my time by counting the number of left and right turns and estimating blocks, whch was more difficult, until we stopped and were ushered through what sounded, from the echoes, like an alley. I was pretty sure we had gone in circles and weren't far from where we had started, which was reassuring, because if they were taking the trouble

to disorient us it was possible they intended to let us go eventually. I have a mind that's highly developed for clutching at straws.

Going through the alley I heard a grunt and a snatch of inebriated song, and one of the men said, "Get rid of the wino." Then we went inside a building, up some stairs, down a hall, and into a room. I was shoved onto a stool and the blindfold—a black hood that had been thrown over my head—was taken off, along with the gag, but my wrists were still bound behind me. The room was unfurnished except for a couple of easy chairs and a table. There were no windows. A man was sitting in one of the chairs. Taylor was nowhere to be seen. The man was looking at a folder. He had blond hair and a good-looking, dead face. I wanted to tell him to hurry up because Polly and Bran would start to worry when we didn't show up at the theater. I pictured them sitting contentedly in the theater, munching popcorn, and suddenly felt a tremendous yearning to hear Lotte Lenya sing "Pirate Jenny." I was imagining the song, line by line, in my head when an impersonal male voice scrambled the illusion.

"This is the end of the line for you people. We've had our eye on you for a couple of years now."

"Years?"

He smirked. "You're out of your league, girl. Way out. You're not dealing with amateurs now."

He lit a cigarette very self-consciously. I could see him mentally reviewing paragraph J-17 in the interrogation manual: If she's a smoker it will make her want one, and if she isn't you can blow smoke in her face.

"But if you cooperate with us you can get off scot-free. And serve your country at the same time."

"You don't serve somebody by helping them do something stupid and self-destructive."

"And of course *you* decide what's best for the country."

"That's right. And so do you, and so do two hundred million other bozos. That's what it's all about, isn't it?"

Things weren't going the way he wanted, so he shifted ground. "We're not anxious to hurt you," he lied. "Just tell us who the other Makluts are."

"Who the *what* are?"

"You know what I'm talking about."

"I really don't. Could you spell it?"

"I suppose you never heard of Louie Follenby."

I could quite honestly say I hadn't, although I had a sneaking suspicion who was intended. Presumably Taylor was being interrogated in another room, and I began to wonder what he was likely to say. Taylor was honest to the point of simplemindedness sometimes, but he'd be too loyal to Louise to implicate her. I decided to be direct.

"Why are we here? What do you want from us?"

"I'll ask the questions."

"I'm just trying to save time. If you tell me what you're looking for. . . ."

"I said, I'll ask the questions."

"If you don't tell me what you're looking for I can't very well help you find it."

"Where were you yesterday afternoon?"

"We went for a picnic in the country."

"You might as well know that we picked up two of your friends. They already told us everything."

I jumped a little, thinking he meant Bran and Polly, but what could they have told him?

"Well, if they told you everything, you obviously don't need us."

He didn't like that. He was the kind of closet wimp who calls any woman he can't handle a "ball breaker."

"We want to find out if your tolerance for pain is as good as theirs."

I began to feel frightened—not because I might tell all I knew, but because this asshole obviously thought I knew a lot more than I did and might keep torturing me long after I'd cracked.

"I told you, if I knew what you wanted to know I could help you."

The door opened at that point and one of the other men came in. He was carrying our bag with the Gormanizers. He put it down and took one out.

"Your friends had a couple of these, too."

So it wasn't Polly and Bran. Who? Must have been Louise's friends. Maybe the chanting women Taylor saw. Maybe Kali. . . .

A snatch of drunken song wafted up from the alley through the open door. The two men looked at each other.

"I thought Mel was taking care of him."

"I thought so, too. Go see."

The blond man left. The other one, who seemed to have more authority, looked at me with an air of great reasonableness. "You know, we're just trying to do our job. You can either help us and get off easy or be in a whole lot of trouble the rest of your life, which may be very short. You don't look like the kind of person that normally gets involved in sabotage—"

"Sabotage?"

"Yes, sabotage. We're talking about treason here, so I'd suggest you take it seriously."

"I'd take you a lot more seriously if we were in a police station instead of a back alley."

"You want credentials?" He smiled, tightly. "Will it make a difference?"

I nodded firmly, although I had no idea where we were heading. After some hesitation he showed me a card with a picture, his name, and the information that he worked for a government intelligence agency. I looked more skeptical than I felt. He took a Gormanizer out of the bag and unwrapped it.

"Two of these are being analyzed at our labs, but it would speed things up if you'd tell us what they are."

I smiled inadvertently as I imagined a whole roomful of scientists trying to make sense out of one of Louise's creations. The tests, the analyses, the careful gloved handling, the dismantling—piece by piece, each meticulously tagged—the white coats flapping, glasses pushed back on furrowed brows. . . .

"I wish I knew," I said. "It's magic to me."

"We're all here to help you remember, so you'd better start now and save yourself a lot of pain and grief. You're in big trouble, girl! Do you think the United States government is going to let a half dozen ten-cent terrorists sabotage two of their missiles and just wave bye-bye?"

I was genuinely shocked. "I thought they were aborted."

He thought I was being funny and was mad enough to hit me, but fortunately the blond one came back at that point. He looked worried and frightened. I noticed that the wino was still mumbling his song in the alley.

"Come here a minute! Quick!"

The chief inquisitor looked at him with annoyance, then followed him out, slamming the door behind him.

I got up and went over to the door. By turning around I could get one hand in position to turn the knob, but it was locked. I thought about trying to position myself behind the door to attack my inquisitor when he came back, but what could I do with my hands tied? There was no way to free myself in time—none of the sharp objects conveniently left lying around when people get in these situations in old movies. I was developing this harebrained scheme of turning off the lights and kicking the stool under his feet, and I was trying to reach the light switch with my shoulder when I heard the door being unlocked. I waited but nothing happened. Very quietly I opened the door. The corridor looked empty. I could hear two of the men talking in whispers at the bottom of the stairs. I couldn't hear the wino singing.

I turned down the hall, away from the stairs, looking for the room Taylor was in. I came to an open doorway on the right, but it was dark and I could see a light under a door on the left farther down—the room next to mine. As I headed toward it I suddenly got a whiff of Old Spice and a pudgy arm grabbed me around the neck from the open doorway, covering my mouth. At the same time I felt a sharp point in the middle of my back.

"Keep it quiet if you want to get out of here."

I nodded, as best I could, and the hand relaxed. The knife point left my back and I felt the bindings on my wrists tug and then drop off. I ran for the room the light was coming from, listened for a moment, and quietly opened the door. Taylor was alone, sitting in a metal folding chair with his head thrown back and his eyes open. I thought he was dead, but when I got close I could see he was breathing faintly. I lifted his head up and slapped him lightly, but nothing happened. I realized he must be out of his body and felt a twinge of envy that he had that extra option available in tight situations. I slapped him again, quite a bit harder, hard enough to leave a mark in fact (the envy helped), but still nothing. Then for some reason I kissed him softly on the mouth and his eyes flickered immediately.

"Hurry up! We're getting out!" I whispered.

He blinked, nodded, and got up slowly, shaking his feet and

stumbling a little, complaining that various parts of him were asleep. Which reminded me how stiff and sore my own wrists were. We made an odd couple, shaking, rubbing, and stumbling our way down the hall. When we passed the dark doorway the arm emerged again and held Taylor while the knife sliced off his wrist bindings. Taylor, still a little dazed, muttered thanks and continued limping toward the stairs.

Our liberator—a short, pudgy man with active jowls and very quick, light movements—now emerged from the shadows. He was unconvincingly dressed in baggy jeans and a faded plaid shirt that transformed itself into some kind of South American colonel's uniform whenever you tried to picture him in your mind. Before we reached the stairs the wino outside began to mutter his song again, and the pudgy man quickly shoved us into "my" room and closed the door on all three of us. We could hear the men coming up the stairs again. Our liberator was now holding a gun with a silencer on it and used it to motion me away from the door. I got back on the stool and tried to look tied up and droopy. In a moment the blond man came in and walked toward me. The pudgy man quietly closed the door behind him and when he turned around in surprise, shot him through the heart. As he slid bonelessly onto the floor the pudgy man quickly turned off the lights and slipped out. He was just in time: The chief inquisitor, having checked in on Taylor to see if he'd revived yet, was rushing out again, calling for the blond man. He barely got a grunt out before our pudgy friend shot him, too. I realized, uneasily, that this man did not waste bullets. So far it was one to a customer. I was beginning to feel a little sick from all the slaughter but I didn't have time to dwell on it. He hissed at us to get going and disappeared again into the dark doorway. We had just started down the stairs when I remembered the Gormanizers and thought, "Shit, if they really did stop the missiles I'm not going to leave them lying around here." So I ran back to the room, grabbed the bag, stuffed the Gormanizers into it, and headed for the stairs again, just in time to see the other two men racing down the hall toward me, back-lit from an open door at the very end of the corridor.

For a few seconds I just stood there, frozen, at the top of the stairs. Trying to run down steps with the two of them after me seemed

crazy, even though I knew they wanted me alive and all that. I didn't have the ghost of a plan, but when they were a few feet away I was suddenly back at my aikido dojo in Las Lunas, taking my black-belt test, and this was the final *rondori,* with everyone running at me at once. Without thinking about it at all I just dropped the bag and practiced my *kaitenage* and *kokyunage* in quick succession, and when I picked up the bag again and turned around there were two crumpled bodies sprawled at the foot of the stairs. One was groaning, one wasn't. I edged carefully down the stairs past them, noticing as I did so that the silent one was in fact dead. Judging from the bullet hole in his head he was probably dead before I threw him. I *thought* he'd been pretty relaxed for someone not used to taking falls. The pudgy man must have shot him as he went by the doorway, allowing him just enough momentum to reach me. The pudgy man was following me lightly down the stairs, gun in hand, and he casually dispatched the injured man as he went by, as if he were putting a wounded animal out of its misery.

Taylor, a little breathless from having to dodge the flying bodies, joined us at the bottom and we went outside, where I could still hear the wino mumbling. On the stoop we almost fell over still another body, which proved to be the unfortunate Mel, whose fate had apparently provoked the whispered conversation I had heard. I turned to say good-bye to our liberator, who was fishing some keys out of Mel's pocket. He didn't strike me as the kind of person I would want to spend a whole lot more time hanging out with, and this perception was quickly confirmed. As he came up he was smiling benignly but he had his gun pointed at me and his hand out.

"I'll take those."

He pointed at the bag. Despite my reluctance to part with them—especially after all the trouble I'd gone through to recover them—I handed them over promptly. I could see that the man had no patience whatever. He thanked me politely, unlocked the black van, put the bag inside, and climbed in the driver's seat. Then he looked into the shadows where the snatches of song had come from and said, in a louder voice:

"Okay, Chief."

As he started the engine I looked toward the shadows in time to see a tall, skinny figure unwind itself from a heap on the ground and

stagger to its feet. He walked with the doubtful gait of a man who expects the earth to bulge up at any moment and strike the sole of his shoe prematurely, out of pure random malice. He carried a wine bottle in one hand and had a huge floppy gray tweed coat on, despite the warm weather. With much weaving and uncertainty he nevertheless managed relatively quickly to get around to the passenger side of the van. There he waved the bottle at us in friendly greeting and opened the door with much ceremony. There was something about him that agitated my brain, and although I knew we should be making tracks down that alley, I couldn't stop watching him.

Just before getting into the van he stopped. I thought he was lighting a cigarette at first. But then he held the bottle at arm's length for a second and looked at it disapprovingly, as if it were the demon rum personified, and with an elegant sweep of his arm lobbed it casually into the doorway of the building, where it exploded into a mass of flame.

Taylor and I stared at the fire in astonishment as it roared through the door and up the stairs. When we looked back the black van was already at the far end of the alley.

"Somebody just came into a lot of fancy equipment . . . including ours."

Taylor didn't say anything. His face, lit up by the soaring flames, had a dazed look, and I wondered if he were really "back."

"Come on," I said. "We'd better get out of here before we get in more trouble."

He nodded distractedly and we ran off down the alley.

Flight

TAYLOR STILL SEEMED dazed when we finally found Polly and Bran in the restaurant. Apparently things hadn't gone too well in our absence because we could hear them arguing loudly as we opened the door. They stopped short when they saw us, and Bran jumped up.

"Ah! At last! You had us so worried we've gotten into a huge fight about nothing at all!"

But Polly was still burning, and when I immediately headed for the bathroom she followed me in, talking all the way.

"What were you *doing*? I was completely freaked! I'm sitting in the movie wondering where you are, watching all these weird people slinking around, singing in German, and there's only about five other people in there, and I'm feeling really weirded-out, like, shit, maybe the whole thing is some SM trip they're into, and there's going to be a whole number with nazis and torture and stuff, and I

started getting really paranoid, like you guys were some kind of procurers or something and it was a white slave ring and they were going to do bizarre stuff to me with chains and hacksaws, you know, after they softened me up with the movie and got themselves all excited and everything! And then Bran starts *commenting* on the movie in a really loud voice and the other people are telling him to shut up and I'm thinking, 'What am I doing here?' I was really pissed at you for not coming. Were you trying to fix us up or what? I mean, Bran's been nice to me and everything, and he's really attractive, but he's a little old, right?"

"Umm."

I'd only been half-listening up to now. My bladder was singing little arias of relief.

"So then the movie's over and you're still not back and he starts laying all this shit on me about how if you understand this movie you understand the whole twentieth century. And that really pissed me off, you know, because a lot of what's going on today they didn't have idea one about in 1931. So I say, 'You understand New Wave *music* and you understand the twentieth century!' I mean I know it was a stupid thing to say, but it wasn't any stupider than what *he* said! So then he says, really pompous—I wanted to flatten him—'New Wave music is like the Holy Roman Empire: neither—'"

"Polly, shut up!" I interrupted.

She was startled but she did.

"We're in trouble. We've got to leave town. Do you want to come or not?"

I pushed her out the door before she could answer and collected the others. Taylor was still looking like a disoriented sea turtle, and Bran had begun to sense something was wrong as I hustled them out of the restaurant and into the car.

"What's up?" he asked. "What took you so long?"

"Taylor and I have to leave town. Right away."

"Is it about the band?" Polly asked, her paranoia instantly reinstated.

"In a way."

While we were driving home I told them what had happened and

how close I thought we had come to experiencing the kind of interrogation that leads to chronic disabilities. Polly wanted to know what the men looked like, and we tried to match up descriptions—my feds against her feds. The resemblances seemed pretty iffy to me but Polly was convinced.

"Oh, God! It's the same guys! Oh, Jesus!"

"We don't *know* that, Polly! They're all clones anyway. They're all recruited from the same schools and they all have to pass the same exam: 'Name ten good things about Hitler.' What's the difference? If they're the same guys they're all dead."

But somehow this thought didn't comfort Polly any more than it had me.

"I want to go, too! Like immediately!"

I had mixed feelings about having another flaky person along, but we couldn't very well abandon her. Bran sweetened the pill by announcing that he wanted to come, too.

"What would I do here? I refuse to set foot in that leprous institution again. Besides," he said gallantly, "you may need help."

It was very British of him, I thought. He looked like David Niven or Ronald Colman flipping an RAF scarf over one shoulder and striding out of the officers' mess to face almost certain death from German fliers or bedouin hordes.

The big question now was where to go, since it wasn't clear what we were running from, who was pursuing us, what they wanted, where they would be likely to look for us, or even if we were all running from the same people (who, to confuse things even further, seemed to have disagreements among themselves). We talked briefly about going to New York. It seemed logical—an easy place to get lost in, and all of us had friends there. But when it came right down to it, everybody had some reason why they didn't want to. Polly had once been beaten and raped in the East Village, and in her present state of mind the entire city seemed menacing. I wanted to be nearer to Athene—as near as I could get without endangering her—and was desperately searching for a rationale that would put us in the vicinity of Cape Cod, where she was staying with Waite.

"I'm with Polly," I said firmly when she'd voiced her repugnance. "I loathe New Yorkers. They go to everything and see nothing. They're too busy talking about it. And they're always making fun of Californians for not being depressed."

A flimsy pretext, but mine own. I was busy trying to think of a good reason why anyone would want to spend a summer in Providence, Rhode Island. . . .

"And they never stop boasting about how dangerous and beastly it is living there," Bran chimed in. His only concern was pleasing Polly and undoing the movie fiasco. "All the while letting you know they consider this behavior to be a sign, not of masochism, but of moral superiority." He thought for a moment. "I suppose you could say New Yorkers have done for depression what the Japanese did for pouring tea."

I broke into his ruminations to put in my bid for a southern New England locale. Polly brightened up immediately and said she had musician friends in Boston who could get her a gig under another name.

"A gig?" Bran and I said in wedded shock.

"Look, I'm a singer!" she said stubbornly "If I have to stop I won't care if they kill me or not! I'll change my name and everything, but I won't stop! Ever!"

Bran and I looked at each other and decided to let it pass for the time being.

Taylor was quiet during all this. I wondered if I'd brought him back a little too abruptly from wherever he'd gone when he was *ex corpore*. He was sitting bolt upright in the passenger seat as I drove back to Bran's. I was talking over my shoulder to the others in a way that usually makes him nervous, but he was just staring out the window while we frantically tossed around possible locations, strategies, and living arrangements. But when we pulled into Bran's garage he seemed to come out of it a little. He leaned forward, opened the glove compartment, took out a map of New England that I didn't remember having, unfolded it methodically, and pointed to a faint circle that had been penciled around a small Boston suburb.

"Devon. We have to be near Devon, Massachusetts. We can live anywhere around Boston as long as it's not far from Devon."

He didn't state this as a suggestion or a possibility; nor did he offer any argument or explanation. He was as unequivocal as a weatherman stating the hour of sunrise or high tide. Then he folded the map up, put it back, walked into the house, went to bed with his clothes on, and fell alseep.

"It's close enough," I thought to myself. We all looked at each other and nodded, as if Devon was the obvious choice we'd all been waiting for—that while we might be too tired and dull-witted to spot a fish swimming in the water, we were savvy enough to react when someone hauled one out and slapped us in the face with it. None of us (including Taylor) had ever set foot in Devon or had the slightest idea what went on there. Certainly we had never heard of Steinkopf Laboratories, which housed classified research on Direct Unchanneled Communication—a project popularly known among the two hundred or so people who had authorized access to it as "Donald Duck." All we knew was that we were tired and spooked, with no clue what lay ahead of us and a lot of nifty nightmares about what was coming up behind. We didn't know what we were going to do when we got there, how we'd live or where, how long we'd have to stay, and whether it would ever be safe to go home again and lead normal lives. Our trip had started out as the kind of daffy adventure that fuels fireside reminiscences—the kind you never tire of telling but, unfortunately, people get tired of hearing. (That's probably why couples break up or have affairs or children after a few years: the need for new audiences.) But the whole thing was way beyond monologue fodder now.

Despite our anxiety to get under way, we all began to realize we needed sleep. We agreed to get up, pack, and be on the road by 6:00 A.M. Bran, who traveled a lot and was always ready to leave on short notice, called one of a roster of house-sitters and made his arrangements. (He said he always used gay men because they kept the place neat. I told him he was stereotyping—that I knew plenty of gay slobs. He said not in Denver.)

As we all trundled off to bed, nodding docilely and saying "Devon" in little satisfied mumbles, I thought, "This is all it takes to create a dictator. You just make people very tired, scare the living shit out of them, give them some dumb but manageable direction

like 'Devon, Massachusetts,' and you can get them to do anything you want." The impact of this insight was so great I immediately lost consciousness and never even turned over until Bran came bustling in the next morning, saying something disgustingly nautical like, "All hands fore and aft!" I put myself on automatic pilot and was ready to leave in twenty-five minutes, which gave me time to vacate on the couch for a while. When I woke up I was on the freeway, halfway to Kansas. Driving.

PART TWO
The Duck Pond

The Birds

GRACE CLAIMS THAT I wasn't myself from the time we were captured until we crossed the Mississippi. She was terrified that she had pulled me back into my body too fast and that part of my astral substance was still fluttering around Denver like a baby sparrow looking for its mother. Polly thought being in the mountains had made me unstable, because I had so much air in my chart. She said that's why I needed to live near the ocean and that the Mississippi had revived me.

Actually I kind of came back in stages. I was aware of what was going on as soon as Grace brought me back, but I felt sort of drugged. I couldn't connect my senses with what I was doing. When the bodies started flying down the stairs at me I had a hard time getting out of the way. I would just keep watching them, fascinated, until they were almost on top of me, and even then my body was real sluggish when I would finally scream at it to move. Like a child when

you wake it up too soon—all sullen and cranky. Then riding home I was listening to everybody talking but I couldn't understand why there was any question about where we were going, because Louise had told me where we had to go. Only I couldn't remember where she had said. All the way home. Until we stopped the car to get out—it kind of jolted my memory: I could hear Louise saying, "If you forget, look in the glove compartment."

When I woke up the next morning I was a little more connected with myself. Brandon was very nice and gave me a lot of coffee and toast because he could see I still wasn't moving real fast and didn't feel like talking to anyone. Especially since everybody seemed to be rushing around, except for Grace, who rushed around twice as fast as the others at first and then took a nap on her suitcase. Once we were in the car, I was happy riding along quietly and not saying anything, except when Grace would talk over her shoulder to the people in the backseat while driving, which always makes me nervous.

I finally clicked in completely almost a whole day later, at sunrise the next day—not because we had crossed the Mississippi but because everyone was talking about dreams. We had driven pretty steadily all day and all night, taking turns driving and sleeping, and making only short stops. Bran had driven the graveyard shift, and when we got across Illinois the rest of us kind of woke up and everybody moved to the front so that Bran could stretch out on the backseat. Grace was driving. Polly started talking right away about this dream she'd had about a family of chipmunks who lived in a campground.

"It was this whole like extended family—father, mother, three kids, an uncle, a grandmother—and they were really cute, you know? They would come out and beg from people, sitting up on their little tails and chattering, and people would give them food and they'd sit right there and eat it, holding it in their front paws, and everybody thought they were just unbelievably cute and loved them, and they'd frolic around like Disney animals, you know? And then, my God, they'd go back in their burrows at night, and they were really, you know, like *evil!* Real nasty and vicious to each other, always fighting and hurting each other and saying incredibly mean things, and they hated everybody! And they were hoarding food all the time, and it was all decaying and rotting and smelling up their home and breed-

ing all kinds of disease. And they'd steal things from the campers—not just food but like watches and transistor radios and hubcaps, and they kept all this stuff in their burrow and crawled around on it all night and fought over it. And they got all kinds of weird diseases from the rotten food—"

"Anyone want to stop for breakfast?" Bran interjected. "There's an exit coming up."

"—And sometimes they'd go out at night and sneak into campers' sleeping bags and bite them and give them plague and tetanus and things—"

"If we can't find a place to stay in Boston, we can always find a campground somewhere," Grace said thoughtfully.

"Anyway, they were just really hateful, like they'd get right up on a picnic table and you'd give them a piece of cracker or something and they'd sit up and eat it, looking all twinkly, and when you weren't looking they'd shit in your plate."

"There's the sign!" Bran called out. "RUDY'S: BREAKFAST ALL DAY! Why don't we stop here? I've seen it advertised: OPEN-AIR DINING! WE HAVE CHIPMUNKS!"

"Oh! And they had a car, too! A blue 1983 Datsun. They stole it from a family of campers. And the family went looking for it and got lost in the woods and died."

"In the woods? They were looking for a Datsun in the woods?"

"I guess they weren't too bright."

"Maybe there's something to Social Darwinism after all."

"Anyway it was only a dream."

For some reason the words "only a dream" tripped the last lock on my memory, and it all came back in a rush. But I didn't want to blurt it all out.

"Could the chipmunks drive?" I asked, stupidly, trying to keep Polly chattering. "I mean, being so little and all?"

"They could make themselves bigger and smaller. They were much bigger at home—"

"Aren't we all!" Grace sighed.

"I mean, like, human-size. But they would be regular chipmunk-size on the picnic tables."

"Good idea," mumbled Bran. "I'd feed a bear before I'd feed a six-foot chipmunk."

"Size definitely affects your aesthetic perceptions. Things can get ugly fast when you magnify them a few hundred times." Grace loves to relate everything in the world to everything else. "And vice versa."

Polly was skeptical.

"Everything I can think of is cuter when it's smaller."

Brandon snickered in the backseat, and Polly groaned irritably.

"You know what I mean! What gets ugly when you do a miniature of it?"

"Lots of things. People, animals—they start to look like insects. It's those associations. Make a pimple big enough and you've got Mount Fuji."

"Eeewww! Gross! That's really disgusting!"

It also reminded her of a childhood nightmare, and she and Bran passed the next half hour exchanging dreams, gross and otherwise. Bran finally fell asleep and I was free to digest what happened when I went out of my body that last night in Denver.

I guess I'd gotten to be pretty dependent on Louise in some way because the moment I realized I was "out" I thought of her. And the moment I thought of her I wanted to be with her. And then I *was* with her, in that same room where I'd seen Collie and the other women. But this time it was empty except for four red hens walking around slowly and picking up crumbs from the floor. I watched them for a little while and noticed that they were moving in some kind of pattern, like a square dance. One would waddle into the center, turn around, and back out. Then another would do the same. Then a couple of them would do a kind of do-si-do. I was fascinated. At first it was so slow and so irregular that you'd hardly notice, but as soon as I *did* notice they began to speed it up, strutting frenetically in and out and pecking and jumping so fast and with such crazed, interwoven movements that if I'd been in my body I'd have gotten dizzy and nauseous. As it was, they just blended finally into a reddish blur, which gradually expanded until it blotted out everything. Then I was sitting on a telephone wire with a pigeon that I somehow knew was Louise. Maybe because she had a wad of gum in her cheek. Then I realized I was a pigeon, too, which was a little depressing. Louise was chuckling.

"Didn't expect to catch us twice, did you? We've tightened up

security since last time! But I figure you've come far enough so's I can give you another job."

She didn't really say it all out like that, like a regular conversation. Everything gets transmitted all at once, instantaneously, in a way I've given up trying to describe.

"We've been kidnapped," I told her. "Some guys have us tied up in a building somewhere. They suspect us of stopping the missiles and they want to know how we did it. They've got the Gormanizers, and I think they're ready to torture us."

"Don't worry. You'll be out pretty soon." She took her gum out with one claw and hurled it into the air, where it expanded and floated off like a big balloon. Then she made a face. "It's gonna cost me, too."

Then she told me to go to Devon and find out what was going on there, and although my experience with Louise had taught me that her motives were usually more complex than they first appeared, I was excited and flattered that she was putting all this trust in me. She said that there was a building in Devon called Steinkopf Laboratories and that she wanted me to explore it. Out of my body, of course. She said she didn't know anyone in the East who could do it as well as I did and she couldn't spare any of her colleagues out there—that she'd already lost two. She said I had an unusual ability to hang on to everyday consciousness ("screwdriver mind" was the way she put it) while I was out of my body. I explained that I tended to stay in pretty much the same state of mixed consciousness all the time, which is why they used to say I was disoriented and lock me up. I wondered if I had finally found my niche in life.

Anyway, I was to go to Devon, which was okay with me. Better than being tortured in Denver. She told me how to "call" her and that she would stay in touch but couldn't come in person for a while.

You're probably wondering why I would need to be physically close to Devon, since once you're out of your body one place is as close as another. Louise had explained it to me one day in Other Fork: She said it was a psychological strain for Western-science-indoctrinated people to go long distances, because they felt it had to be tiring.

"My Granny," she said to me one day, "used to go to a planet in

another galaxy two, three times a week. 'Course she didn't call it that—she called it the 'Lizard People in the Sky Country.' But I knew what it was 'cause I went with her once." She fired her gum into Big Ben. "Folks there were real ugly!" She laughed. "Granny never got tired, 'cause she didn't know she was supposed to. Modern folks, though, I've seen 'em waste away with it. They figure they oughta have jet lag, and by God they do! When your mind says it's a long trip, your body's gonna believe it."

For that reason, she now told me, I should set myself up for an easy commute.

"It'll be hard enough work just doin' what I'm gonna have you do. Be sure you take the Captain with you to keep an eye on the ground. The other folks too, if you want, but don't tell 'em anything."

She wouldn't tell *me* any more either—not as long as I was still a captive—and just to be on the safe side she said she was going to block my memory.

"It'll come back after a while. I put a map in your car, and when you're safe you'll remember that. Tell you what: I'll throw in a free psychic tune-up."

She beckoned and flew off, and I followed. It was like plunging into a railroad tunnel. When I came out the other side, I was in a strange laboratory with an enormous skylight. I was strapped to a table. Looking down I saw that I had an enormous body clad in an ill-fitting dark suit and huge boots. There was something familiar about it but I didn't have time to think because there was a lot of activity going on around me. A tall, bearded man in a white lab coat was rubbing his hands and looking at me while his three hunch-backed assistants were running around the lab turning valves and throwing switches.

Suddenly I felt a tremendous surge of energy go coursing through my body. It was so strong I couldn't stand it and began to twitch. The bearded man was cackling gleefully and commanded his dwarfs to increase the power. They opened more valves and threw more switches and I completely flipped out, bursting the straps that held me down and jumping up off the table. I found I had all kinds of wires attached to my head so I ripped them all off. I started toward the bearded man, mad with anticipated revenge. I would throttle

him with my bare hands. I stopped and looked at them. I could snuff him out in a second with these huge hands. Anything to stop that insane cackling, which grew more uncontrollable every moment. I noticed stitches on my wrists and at the same moment the cackle began to sound familiar. As I started toward the doctor he, his assistants, and the entire lab dissolved, and I was back in Louise's room with the four hens square dancing around the floor and clucking their brains out. I heard Louise's voice inside my head (or whatever I was wearing): "Batteries recharged for no charge! Visions custom-Taylored! Get on back, now!"

The last was delivered with some urgency, and at the same moment I felt a tug from my body. I was reluctant to leave and go back to all that pain and unpleasantness, but the tugs became more demanding, and the final one made it somehow seem less frightening.

So that was what happened when I was *ex corpore,* as Grace calls it. I thought about it for a while and then joined in the conversation. Grace seemed pleased and commented on my prior distractedness. But I waited until we were alone to tell her about it. We had stopped for gas, and Grace and I went to buy food and coffee while Polly and Bran were heading for the rest rooms.

"Christ, Taylor, I just thought it was as good a place as any. You mean that old badger has more goodies in store for us? How long are we signed on for? I don't even remember enlisting! If I'm going to be in a war, I want to be an officer! I'm tired of this buck private shit! They don't tell you anything! Don't you think we ought to have a contract?" She quieted down and made a face. "Oh, well, why not? All they can do is torture us forever and mutilate us."

"I don't know if it has anything to do with those people."

"Which people? We don't know anything about any of them! Does that pudgy man work for Louise? We're in weird company, Taylor!"

I nodded. Her remark was given new force by the reappearance of Polly, her purple mohawk incompletely masked by an orange kerchief.

I was a little upset by Grace's reaction. Even though Louise was obviously looking out for us in some way, Grace couldn't stand

being in the dark. I don't know why it didn't bother me: I've never accepted anybody's authority so uncritically. I guess I was pretty naïve then. I not only trusted Louise completely, I thought she could do anything she wanted.

Cambridge

WE SPENT THE next night in a motel near Albany. Taylor was having trouble sleeping in the car and we wanted to be fresh for our assault on Boston. We also wanted to lower our profile a little and this meant giving Polly some new orchestrations.

Finding her a new name, for example, had helped us while away several dull stretches en route, punctuating the dreary silence with sincere or facetious suggestions, mostly by Bran, who was bucking for the honor of choosing the winner. (Taylor said these names popping out of the void as we sped along reminded him of the view from the bridge of *Starship Enterprise,* which is the kind of bizarre association you can always count on from Taylor.) We went through hundreds before Bran found one Polly liked—the one she made famous, the one you all know her by: The Great Hope White.

Bran and I had also bought her a cheap wig and some caps and

scarves on our way through Kansas, but we hadn't stopped anywhere long enough to do a real overhaul.

When we got to the motel room the first thing we did was shave off the mohawk. Polly cried a little, but basically she was a pretty good sport about it. The wig freaked her out, too, but after I'd fixed her up she didn't look bad at all. Bran and I both felt that her powerful voice would be even more startling if it came from a physical presence that accentuated her basically waiflike look. The wig was short and in another month or so she wouldn't need it. Some of her clothes didn't clash with the new look, and I gave her a few things of mine that worked precisely because they were too big for her. The rest of her clothes I bundled up and dropped in a Goodwill box. Polly protested so loudly about a few items and looked so miserable that Bran began to weaken, but I was ruthless. Anything she had ever worn on stage went out. Too many people knew who Polly was and what she looked like.

She certainly looked different now, as she glared sulkily at her reflection in the mirror. "I mean, what is this? I look like Sissy Spacek in a concentration camp! It's like a washout! I might as well not be here!"

"That's the idea, dear, remember? You're going underground."

"Does that mean I have to look like a mole?"

She looked pleadingly at Bran, but he was as concerned as I was about the danger of Polly appearing again in public.

"With a voice like yours, duck, it won't matter what you look like."

"Just for few weeks until you get used to your new persona," I assured her. "Then we can start building you out a little. But actually you look pretty cute now."

The men both nodded enthusiastically. The straight sandy-colored hair and her own light complexion accentuated her hazel eyes, making them look even larger and more wistful. Her high cheekbones, which the mohawk had given an armored, cold look, now evoked the old deer-poised-for-flight image that so many men (and women) find irresistible. She looked like a gawky, slightly tomboyish thirteen-year-old with a big appetite for everything.

All of us wanted to live in Cambridge. Polly's friends were there and

so were the places where she'd be most likely to find work. Bran wanted to be near the Harvard library: "As long as I'm here at the great well of knowledge, you see, I might just as well fill up the old bucket. Overrated as it is, it has a few tomes of interest."

Taylor and I didn't want to be dependent on the car, and Cambridge was the best location for that. We all felt that driving around in my car with California plates was asking for trouble. We would register it with Massachusetts plates and garage it for the duration, using it only for emergencies. In retrospect it seems silly to have kept it at all (after all the grief I gave Polly), silly not to have done something about it before coming to town, silly to think we couldn't be traced anyway. We were completely paranoid on the one hand and ridiculously overconfident on the other.

We left the Coupe in a parking garage for the time being, and Bran rented a blue 1983 Datsun ("Just like in my dream!" Polly said). Then we started househunting. Cambridge was hot and sticky and noisy and uninviting, and they seemed to be in the process of rebuilding it in various ways—none of them for the better. Although we had all been in Cambridge before, Polly was the only one who'd actually lived there, and Polly can't really be said to be well oriented spatially even at the best of times. June was nearly over and almost everything that was livable had already been rented to summer-school students and faculty. What was left was absurdly overpriced. We got more and more irritable, especially at poor Polly.

"One twenty-three Pearl Street," she said at one point. "That's near Central Square."

"Yes, duck, we *know* it's near Central Square," Bran said, condescendingly. "It *says* Central Square in the ad. We want to know *where* near Central Square."

"I think it's between Mass. Ave. and the river. Don't be so superior."

"That's about twenty fucking blocks!" I reminded her.

"I guess."

"So *which end?* Are we talking river or square?"

"How am I supposed to know? What am I, an atlas?"

"You *did* live here for a year, didn't you?" Bran asked coldly.

"It's confusing! Everything's crooked! The river's all twisty, and the streets all curl around like flamingos!"

"Not this one," I said, looking at the map.

"We want to know," Bran said, with exaggerated patience, "which way the numbers go."

"Oh! I remember. They all go *out* . . . from *something*. But I forget what."

"Wonderful! Remind me never to go camping with you!"

"Don't worry! I can't think of anything more gross! I'd rather go with Louise's dog!" (The force of this comparison was lost on Bran but *I* was suitably impressed.)

"We can only hope it's a seeing-eye dog," Bran said.

"If you two don't stop fighting about camping, that's what we're going to end up doing all summer!"

"Can't we just *go* there and *look* for it?" Taylor broke in. "At least we'd be cooler driving around! Instead of sitting here bitching!"

When Taylor gets crabby things have to be pretty bad, but they soon got worse. Whenever we tried to drive to Pearl Street we'd get caught up in one of those Kafka-esque one-way maelstroms, so popular in Cambridge, and spewed out again, headed in the wrong direction. After the third unsuccessful assault things were deteriorating badly, and I proposed a break for coffee and a snack.

We found a small café near Harvard Square that had a half dozen outdoor tables with umbrellas—crammed into a tiny wedge of space between two buildings, with an anemic-looking bush at the back. It depressed me at first—this pathetic little shard of civility tossed into the middle of a frenzied urban junkheap. I missed Las Lunas. To make matters worse there were no tables empty.

Then our luck changed. A man who had been talking to a woman at another table decided to join her and offered us his table. We crowded around it gratefully and sipped our cappuccinos and devoured pastries in complete silence. A little restored, we examined our rapidly shrinking list of possibilities, none of which seemed appealing enough even to go look at. As we discussed the few pros and many cons of each, I noticed that the man who had given up his table was looking at us with increasing interest. Finally he leaned across and spoke.

"Excuse me, I couldn't help hearing. . . . Would you be interested in a house in Belmont? I have a friend who has a place he wants to rent for the summer. A nice, big, roomy four-bedroom house with a

yard, screened-in porch, two-car garage . . . completely furnished, nice garden. . . . He hasn't listed it yet, but it's all ready to rent. You could move in any time."

Our reactions were mixed.

Polly: Belmont?

Taylor: Any time?

Bran: Belmont?

Me: How much is it?

"It's only a mile or two from the Cambridge line. Less than ten minutes from here. And the bus is only three blocks away. It's a nice easy bike ride—"

"How much is it?"

"I don't want to say for sure, but I think he'd rent it to you for $800 a month if he liked you. He's kind of particular who he rents to, and I know he doesn't want any kids there. You don't have any kids, do you?"

Taylor looked at me as we all shook our heads solemnly. "Weekend visits don't count," I thought to myself. Taylor and I were sold and Polly was weakening. The price was phenomenally low for a summer sublet, and we were beginning to be anxious about money Bran, on the other hand, is loaded and could muster a lot more sales resistance.

"Belmont? It sounds very nice but, really, *Belmont?* The home of the John Birch Society? Weren't we talking about walking to the Square? Living among—"

"At least we can look at it," I interrupted, before he could say something offensive like "civilized people," which I'm sure was on the tip of his tongue.

It was on a nice old shady street and so comfortable and so obviously inhabited by "civilized people" that three of us were sold on the spot. We drove Bran back and forth a few times to demonstrate how close it was, but I think what convinced him was the kitchen, which he acknowledged to be a "real Cambridge kitchen." By this he meant that it was very red and white, had a butcher-block table, several spice shelves, lots of wine racks, cannisters, hanging plants, ropes of garlic, pitchers full of wooden spoons and chopsticks, racks with dangling cooking implements like ladles and forks, heavy, squarish tumblers, Marimekko towels, bright shiny plates in kinder-

garten colors, and rows of expensive knives on a magnetic knife rack. I was tempted to say it wasn't authentic without sooty windows and chips of old lead paint on the sill but maintained silence in the interest of diplomacy.

"It's close enough," he sighed, as we waited breathlessly; but whether he meant geographically or culturally we were too relieved to inquire.

That night we settled in. Bran decided to lease the Datsun for the whole summer, and we sneaked the Coupe into the dark side of the garage at night and got rid of the California plates. Polly contacted her friends and came home all excited to tell us she had a solo audition at a bar in Inman Square and was going to join a group that had just lost its lead singer. We were all uneasy about her resurfacing so soon, even disguised, but she was so ecstatic we kept our fears to ourselves.

"Can you believe it? It's like the whole town was just waiting for me to get here! It's absolutely synchronistic!"

Bran, meanwhile, had discovered an old friend and colleague who was in Cambridge for the summer doing research, and they had decided to collaborate on a paper. (The only people I knew at Harvard were two women I detested.) Taylor was all geared up for a summer of astral espionage in the service of heaven only knew what—giving America back to the Indians for all I knew. So everybody had a lot to look forward to.

Except me. I suddenly realized I was stuck in a hot, sticky, conservative New England suburb with nothing to do but hang around and take care of a big house and guard Taylor's mortal vessel. I called Peter, who said it served me right for going off on frivolous escapades when the world was going up in shit. He said I should do some political work in Cambridge. I told him what he should do and where, and hung up.

I was brought up to finish what I start, and our Denver experience produced a strong feeling of having started something. But having nothing to do weighed on my spirit, and I've often wondered if I would have stuck it out in Belmont if I'd thought for a second it was safe to go home. I couldn't even work on the articles I had to write, because all the materials were in Las Lunas, along with everything

else I owned. For this I had renounced housewifery? To sit in a house in the suburbs baby-sitting Taylor's deserted body?

Then I thought, "Come on, Castleman, pull yourself together. We just got here. You can at least try to find out what it is we're getting into." So next day I went to a phone booth and called the Steinkopf labs, posing as a chemist looking for a job. The woman who answered said only, "We don't hire chemists. That's not the kind of work we do here."

"Oh. What kind of work *do* you do?"

"We do research on communication."

"Communication? What kind of communication?"

A pause. "I'm sorry. It's classified, and I'm afraid I can't tell you any more about it."

I knew from past experience that wherever you've got scientists trying to build reputations security is at best imperfect, even in top-secret research, so I went to the Harvard library and looked in various logical places for references to Steinkopf. I finally found one in a book on psychic research. It mentioned the Steinkopf lab's work on Direct Unchanneled Communication as a prime example of the military applications of psychic research.

"Goddamn that Louise," I thought. "Here we go again."

Detours

GRACE WAS LUKEWARM about it but I liked our house right off. It was kind of ordinary-looking from the outside—brick with white trim, porches on each side, lilac hedges all around. But inside it was real spacious and comfortable, with a big living room that ran the length of the house, a grand piano, stereo—all the comforts. One of the porches was the kind of glassed-in non-room that people never use except to banish their children, but the other was a screened-in outdoor porch that carried us through a lot of muggy nights.

My favorite place, outside of my room, was the breakfast nook—a real old-fashioned one, completely enclosed on three sides, the size of a comfortable booth in a restaurant or bar. It just fit the four of us, and that was where we did all our planning and discussing.

My bedroom was in the back of the house, shaded by a huge oak tree, with a lot of heavy oak furniture to match. It gave me a much-

needed feeling of solidity when I was out of my body. A snug harbor.

We didn't argue much over rooms. Grace wanted to be in the very front room, even though it was small—probably intended as a sewing room originally. It was avocado and white, with gauzy curtains and lots of low white bookcases under the windows. It had the best breeze, and Grace said she wanted it so she could look out and watch people go by, although hardly anybody ever did.

Bran said he'd be willing to pay half the rent if he could have the master bedroom, which ran one whole side of the house and had its own bathroom. It was sparsely furnished with imposing Spanish antiques—very elegant and austere. I was happy in the back, where it was quiet. Polly wasn't sure what she wanted, and ended up with what was obviously a child's room on the side, but she said she didn't care, it was cute, and anyway she was the youngest so it was appropriate. She seemed to be getting kind of a crush on Grace and went out of her way to do whatever Grace wanted.

Our first night in the house I had a dream. I was walking through the streets of a very old city. It was night. I passed an elegant mansion and decided to go inside. I told myself I shouldn't do this, but I didn't seem able to stop. I went up to a window and looked in. The glass was a brilliant blue and it was difficult to see through it. It turned out to be a reflection of the ocean, which was behind me. I was wondering how the ocean could be such a bright blue in the middle of the night, when I slipped on something oily and somehow fell into the house. The dark room smelled damp and earthy, and I thought I could see birds flying way above me, but it was richly and beautifully furnished and very old. Suddenly I heard voices. I fled from one richly appointed room to another, each smaller than the last, until I found myself in a tiny closet from which the only escape was up a flight of steps. But as I started to climb I saw a light: An old hermit in a dun-colored robe was coming down. I couldn't see his face because he was holding the light in front of it. He took me by the arm and pointed down, and I saw that we were standing on a balcony in an old tower, high above the sea. We were on some kind of an island and there was another tower nearby. The hermit handed me a book, but when I opened it, it was written in an unknown alphabet.

I thought about the dream all the next morning. It reminded me of the alchemist dream in some way though I wasn't sure why. But when I got a piece of paper and wrote the two dreams down side by side, the similarities began to emerge. There was the oily surface, the bright blue light, the succession of enclosures, the earthy smell, and the old man in the dun-colored robe. Not to mention the same pervasive feeling of mystery and confusion.

But there were differences, too. In the first dream the alchemist had threatened me. In this one the threat was more subtle, more like a warning. And the old man gave me a book. But what for? Just to prove my ignorance?

The dream left me with an unpleasant, uneasy feeling. And my first efforts to fly to Devon didn't do anything to lift my spirits. Getting out of my body was easy enough: Louise's "tune-up" in Denver seemed to have loosened things up a lot. But no matter how many times I told myself I wanted to go to Steinkopf I couldn't manage even to leave my room. I guess I was frightened, or maybe I didn't feel grounded enough in the new home to be comfortable about going far afield. After lunch I tried again and got as far as paying a visit to Grace, who was putting stuff away and rearranging furniture. I realized that that was what *I* wanted to do, and promptly found myself back in my body. It was no use. I just didn't feel settled in yet. So I puttered around my room for a while, and then Grace and I took the bus into Cambridge and tried to find a café we could really get behind—an effort that continued at intervals throughout the summer.

After coffee we went our separate ways, looking for something to do. I was running out of money and needed some kind of paying job. The university paid Grace through the summer but she was bored and restless, deprived of her usual round of activities. In that one afternoon Grace found an aikido dojo, joined a health club and a women's center, bought a stack pass at the Harvard library, signed up for an acting workshop at the adult center and an advanced course in Spanish at the university summer school, already under way, and agreed to volunteer a half day a week at a nuclear-freeze office. I got a line on a part-time typesetting job.

The next day I tried again to go to Devon. This time I had no trouble traveling about. I visited Grace, Bran, and Polly. I visited the

glass flowers at the Peabody Museum, which I had always wanted to see. I flew over Boston harbor, watched part of a ball game at Fenway Park, even went to Walden Pond. My "spirit body" responded instantaneously to every fleeting impulse, but somehow it never occurred to me to go to Devon now that I was actually in a condition to do so.

Louise had told me that life in the spirit world was entirely determined by desire and impulse—by emotion—and that it was therefore very unruly and difficult to discipline. Obviously I was never going to get to Devon just because Louise thought it was a good idea. I had to *want* to go. But *did* I want to go? Of course I was curious and all, but that was pretty much neutralized by my nervousness about it. Anyway, how could I *want* to go to a place I didn't know anything about?

When I talked to Grace about it she suggested we drive out to Devon after dinner while it was still light and have a look at the place. It was a good opportunity, since we were alone for the evening. Bran and Polly had made peace, and Bran had talked her into going to see the new theatrical sensation in town: *Lear Seven*—a musical version of *King Lear,* done in Kabuki style with a punk gamelan backup group, featuring such pivotal songs as "Blow My Tears Away" and "Apple of My Eye" (sung by Gloucester). The performers wore snowshoes throughout the show, which was performed before a screen on which were projected slides of the holocaust. These directorial innovations, according to one critic, served to dramatize the inclemency of the climatic and political conditions, respectively.

On the way out to Devon we tried to imagine what kind of research they could be doing that would make Louise uneasy, but we couldn't come up with anything. Whatever it was, they had picked a beautiful setting for it. A big, neo-Gothic building that looked more like a monastery than a science laboratory, it sat on top of a small hill with a magnificent view of the surrounding countryside. When we were stopped at the gate we pretended to be sightseers off course. The man at the gate chatted with us and didn't seem at all uptight. There were still quite a few cars in the lot and we wondered if people worked there at night. We circled the area for a while, but there

wasn't any other way to get close to the place. Still, it helped to see it, and I felt confident that I'd have better luck the next day.

But I didn't. I came closer, but I seemed to be hopelessly distractible. The moment I sighted the building my attention would be diverted by some charming feature of the landscape—a stunning elm, a brook hidden under a cluster of azaleas, a grasshopper, a sleepy owl, a hummingbird—and I would be off admiring that. It was like tripping: everything was just as important as everything else, and everything was completely fascinating. I pursued a butterfly, only to be distracted by a dragonfly, and then by a swallow who seemed to be aware of my presence and made a frantic effort to shake me off. Before I knew it I was back in my body.

I decided to "call" Louise. I took a pen in my left hand, went back into a trance state, and visualized her the way she had told me to. When I came out I found I had written a phone number, so I gathered up some change, went out to a booth, and called her. This was the procedure we used from then on whenever I wanted to talk to her. She never gave me the same number twice. Sometimes I would find a two- or three-digit number written after the phone number. This was the number of minutes I had to wait before calling.

When I told Louise my problem, she said my attitude was too practical. "This isn't typesetting, Taylor. Mother Nature doesn't always play it by the book." She gave a little chuckle of approval. "Think of it this way: They've got an egg in there. It gets bigger every day. When it gets big enough they're gonna hatch it, and it'll be the biggest old monster you ever saw. So you have to get in there and find that egg so we can get it out before it hatches."

I told her that the thought of a tyrannosaurus rex (the image that immediately came to mind) ready to pop out of an egg at any moment didn't make Steinkopf any more attractive. She laughed.

"Make up your own story. Like I told you, spirit body gets bored real easy. You got to make that place as interesting as a tree. It'll take practice. You're not gonna be able to do it right away. That's why you're there. You've got a couple of weeks to get the hang of it."

When I talked about it with Grace she just looked at me and shook her head. "Jesus Christ, Taylor, do you realize how crazy this is?" She started to laugh. "Getting messages by automatic writing? What

happens if you're not home? Do you have an answering machine? 'Hello, this is Taylor. I'm sorry, I'm not in my body right now. If you want to leave a message please wait for the alpha wave.' Do you realize what would happen if your shrink got hold of this?"

"It worked, didn't it?" I said, a little defensively.

"That's the worst of it!" She scowled. "You don't even know what you're doing! Anything she tells you, you just trot along like a good little boy and do it! What is she, your mother? I suppose you didn't ask her anything?"

"I didn't think of it."

"How could you not think of it!"

"I was worrying about how to get in the building."

"I can't believe you! If you're going to be such a wimp let *me* talk to her next time!"

"I'm sorry I got you into all this. You can leave if you want to."

"What, and go home, and get tortured by goons? Taylor, I wouldn't care if I knew what was going on. And had something . . . *tangible* to *do!* It's sitting around in the dark and twiddling my thumbs that I can't stand! Aaghh!" She slapped a doorjamb viciously and stalked herself into a quieter frame of mind. "I'm sorry I called you a wimp."

"It's okay."

She shook her head. "I can't believe *I've* been such a wimp!"

She kissed me affectionately and said she couldn't stand seeing me unhappy, and I told her it was all right. But it wasn't. I thought, "Well, I *am* a wimp." It wasn't the first time anyone had said so. It was just the first time *Grace* had ever said so.

That night I had a dream about it. I was walking across a rolling meadow covered with tall grass. It felt hot and stuffy. I heard a clanking sound. It seemed to be close by and synchronized with my footsteps. I realized that it came from me, that I was wearing a full suit of medieval armor. I put my hand to my head and found I had on a helmet with a plume on the top. As I touched it the visor fell down. I looked down at my feet through the slots. With each step they crushed the yellow grass and sank an inch into the soft earth. I stopped, but the clanking sound kept going. I looked up and saw a knight approaching. His face was hidden. "Stand, wimp!" I shouted. "Stand and prepare to die!" I was surprised to hear these words

coming from my own mouth. They sounded ridiculous, and I thought the other knight would laugh at me. But he just drew his sword and kept coming. We fought, and I realized I was stronger. I pierced his armor from the side, by his armpit, and ran him through the heart. He fell dead, but as I started to leave I heard a challenge and turned around. The dead knight was gone but there were two more in his place. We fought, and again I won, and again I turned to leave, and again I was challenged. This time there were four, and so it continued. Each time I was victorious and each time there were twice as many as there had been before, until finally I was faced with an immense army of knights covering the entire meadow, all clanking their armor, waving their swords, snapping their visors shut, and shouting a deafening challenge in unison. I was exhausted by now, and terrified. I surrendered, throwing my sword on the ground.

Immediately the army disappeared, and the original knight stood before me. He raised his visor and I saw my own face. He led me to a cave where there were hundreds and hundreds of wounded knights—grasping severed limbs moodily, or stuffing intestines back into gaping holes, or trying to reattach chunks of bloody flesh where they had been torn off, fitting them on like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle. They were an unprepossessing lot—whiny, mean, babyish, sneaky, vicious, boastful—every vice represented.

"This is your army," said the knight who looked like me.

And he vanished. I looked around the cave. All the knights were looking at me expectantly. I groaned. "Is this all?"

They nodded hopefully. I felt sorry for them and motioned them to follow me out of the cave. They all filed out behind me, still trying to stanch their wounds and stick their severed limbs back on. When we got outside it was raining hard and the meadow had turned into a huge bog. It took all my strength just to lift a foot up out of the mud, and each time it came free with a horrible squawlching sound. I was afraid I was holding up the army but when I turned to look I was shocked to see that I had left them far behind. For as they struggled through the bog they kept losing their detached limbs and organs, which the voracious mud sucked from their torn bodies and feeble clutches. I felt terrified and lonely without them and ran back to help.

I woke up crying to a muggy, cloudy, leaden, yellow day, full of

held breath and distant thunder. Grace was still trying to make up to me for the day before (she even listened to my dream) and at breakfast, after Bran and Polly had left, we talked about ways to make Steinkopf more enticing. Grace, always practical, favored a survival emphasis—trying to picture Steinkopf as the road to peace—but I told her that survival concerns never seem very important once you've left your body behind. She then pointed out that I was attracted to mysteries and hidden things in my dreams (the alchemist ones, for example) and that maybe I just needed to think of Steinkopf less as a white-coat laboratory situation and more as a wizard's cave. But this is hard to do with a building that has fluorescent lighting; and although I flew all around it and explored the rooftops and chimney pots and gutters and dormers, nothing ever made me want to go inside.

The fact is, I just don't *like* laboratories. Or any of those austere indoor places where you have to act mechanical and artificial. "Fuck it," I said to myself, sitting on the roof with my arms around my knees (that's what it felt like, anyway), "I don't have to go in there. That's for grown-ups. They wouldn't like me anyway. I'm not going to be different just for them." And I jumped off and flew down to a little hole out in the field where I'd seen a little milk snake disappearing. When I got inside the snake was just curling up for a nap so I sat and sulked for a while.

It was mid-afternoon by now, and my brown study was abruptly terminated by a clap of thunder. The day's long-hinted-at squall finally broke with brief but sudden violence, causing a forty-five-minute power outage in Devon. The moment the lights went out I found myself inside the darkened building, racing through room after room with unflagging curiosity. I would have to say, looking back on it, that there was nothing on the face of it that wouldn't sit quite comfortably in any other research center, but the strange dull-yellow light provided the aura of magic that I needed.

I didn't discover anything of note on that first visit, but it established a connection and a familiarity. I knew where it was and what it was, and developed a kind of curious affection for it, which I suspect came from the monks or nuns or whoever had used the building originally. I reinforced this feeling from time to time by visiting the

building in the middle of the night, which gave it a fascinating appearance, especially when there was a moon.

One reason I didn't see much that first time was that there were an unusual number of bugs in the building, and with my usual distractibility, I was fascinated by each and every one. In the first room I entered, for example, there was a tiny spider curled up in a corner of the ceiling, and for some reason it immediately caught my eye. The same thing happened in the next room and in all the others. By the time I got bored with the spiders and began to look around more, it was time to leave. It never occurred to me until later to wonder why the same tiny spider was in every room.

Belmont Blues

THE FIRST WEEK we were in Belmont was one of the worst of my life. In contrast to Taylor, my way of dealing with stress has always been to *do* something about it, and there wasn't a thing I could do about any of the things that were bothering me, short of turning us in to the feds or finding Louise and taking her by the throat until she 'fessed up. Every day I woke up struggling with a severe temptation to drive back to Las Lunas and risk the dire consequences.

But aside from a deep aversion to spending the rest of my life in jail, I had two other reasons for hanging in there. One was my reluctance to abandon Taylor, for whom I'd always had an irritating tendency to feel vaguely responsible. The other was that sneaky remark of Louise's—that I had come on this expedition for Athene's sake. She really knew which buttons to press, the old bitch. If it really *was* for Athene, how could I quit? That was the impulse—some eerie maternal instinct, I guess—that connected me to those

two loonies, who were so comfortable operating on pure, off-the-wall intuition—an intuition I didn't share or even understand, yet found myself infuriatingly unable to ignore.

The only thing I could do anything about was seeing Athene, and even that was complicated. If there were still people after us I didn't want to involve her in any way or have anyone able to use her to get at me. Yet the constant feeling of danger made me anxious to see her and make sure she was all right. I called her father (from a phone booth) and he was indecisive and uncooperative, as usual. When I said I wanted to take her for a weekend or an overnight he accused me of being possessive and said this was *his* time. I said I was just offering myself as an on-call baby-sitter, thinking he might be needing a little privacy by now (I know his weak points), and he made a big fuss over giving in and letting her go for a weekend "sometime soon." This meant as soon as he could find a woman and make the arrangements for her to join him. So even on that front I had to wait, although I got some satisfaction from talking to Athene and hearing her obvious pleasure that I was in the vicinity and would be seeing her soon.

I tried to distract myself by getting involved in a million activities, but it didn't work. When you're not doing anything about what's important to you, putting energy into a lot of things that don't really matter is just fatiguing. After a week I had dropped out of half of them. I thought, "My God, I've turned into a typical Las Lunas enthusiast—starting a whole lot of projects and letting them all drift away."

I was also a bit homesick. As soon as we'd settled in I called Peter and gave him our address—swearing him to secrecy, of course—and a few days later wrote him a short letter, mostly to pass on some "fraggies" I'd picked up in a Cambridge café. "Fraggies" are what Peter and I call those overheard fragments of conversation that always sound so inane out of (and often even in) context. We're both ardent collectors; Peter has a thick file of them and plans to publish a volume some day. Taylor disapproves, of course. He says it's nasty and elitist, although most of our best ones come from intellectuals.

Dear Peter:

Cambridge is dirty, sticky, and mean-spirited. Worst of all, it

doesn't have a decent café. The only thing it has going for it is a lot of bricks and ivy and some nice trees. It's not the place I would have chosen for my summer vacation.

I did pick up a few fraggies on my first outing here, however, which you may add to your file:

1. Young male faculty member to female partner: "He's not just a nobody, you know—he was attacked in the New York Review of Books!*"*

2. Earnest female student to friend: "Her theory is that Christianity would have followed a completely different course if Paul hadn't been such a yenta."

3. Middle-aged WASP male to companion: "Frankly I prefer someone who's sensitive to Harris and herringbone."

I expect an immediate response in kind. I need something to cheer me up. It's very ugly here and the people talk funny.

Love,
Grace

Peter was a dear and wrote right back.

Dear Grace:

Since you say I never talk about anything but the article I'm not going to mention it again. Your loss, as you'll realize when I bring it down from the mountain.

Here are the fraggies, as requested—all I've managed to glean since you left:

1. Young woman to boyfriend: "You don't want to be stuck at level two or three forever, do you?"

2. Young male street person to friend: "I've been getting into leather lately. There's more to it than I thought."

3. Thirtyish male dropout to out-of-town visitor at the Salieri: "I still take walks in the woods, but really there's not much in my life anymore except Penelope, and Penelope's away for the weekend."

Otherwise it's pretty slow here. The only thing you missed was the Third Annual Kiwi-Peeling Contest, which was won by the defending champion. I'm dedicating the dull evenings to plowing through Jacob Downs's new book, The Horrors of Love, *which got an ecstatic review in* The New York Times. *One must keep up. . . .*

When are you going to stop being silly and come home? Tell Taylor I hold him personally responsible for setting this folie à deux *in motion. After that you can give him my best. Second best anyway. You can have first this time.*

Peter

The fact that Peter's fraggies made me homesick will give you a rough notion of how bad I was feeling in Belmont.

The only thing that held my interest was aikido, but even aikido was stressful. In Las Lunas I had a female *sensei* and there were more women black belts than men, but here I was completely alone. The *sensei,* Tsubaki, was young, handsome, and brilliant but an indefatigable clown. He seemed to take tremendous delight in having a woman black belt in his dojo, which was a relatively new one, and he gave me a lot of attention. I wasn't sure whether he had a crush on me or just hadn't had a lot of experience training women. I seemed to tickle him enormously in some way. He used to attack me whenever he thought I was preoccupied or distracted or otherwise off guard, but he rarely succeeded because I'm pretty paranoid and have good peripheral vision. His main criticism of my aikido was that I was too tense, too defensive, not "liquid" enough—a criticism I could have accepted more easily (I'd heard it before) if I hadn't heard him say it repeatedly to the three or four most extreme necrophiliacs in the dojo. I also didn't see how attacking me all the time was going to make me more flowing. Still, it was good to be back on the mat, although it wasn't the most friendly dojo I'd ever been in. Half of the guys hated me because I was better than they were and the rest because I was teacher's pet. I was lucky to escape injury.

Aikido complicated life at home, too. Not that home was anything to rave about anyway. I was pissed at Taylor for not standing up to Louise and because he had this important "job" to do, lying around in bed while I had to mind the store. I made him give me the numbers that Louise had "sent" him, since the first three times he had called when I wasn't home, which did nothing to smooth my feathers. I checked the area codes of the numbers: The first one was in Denver, the next in Nevada, and the third in the vicinity of Other

Fork, which at least made a little sense. But the inactivity was intolerable and I was turning into a crabby bitch.

Taylor wasn't the only one who bugged me. As the pace of events slowed down I became more and more aware of the dance going on between Bran and Polly. Bran would pursue her very sweetly and she would soften up—there was obviously a huge attraction there. But whenever they got close to being openly erotic one or the other would get nervous. Sometimes Polly would freak out first—either getting withdrawn or immersing herself in her work. When this happened Bran would get supercilious and pedantic and overbearing, which would accentuate Polly's retreat. Sometimes Bran would freak out first and they'd do it all in reverse. Then after a while they'd make it up and start all over again. Despite the dim view I took of their romantic future I began to long for some kind of denouement. I was much too tense to tolerate a whole lot of suppressed eroticism ricocheting around my house. One day I snarled at Taylor in exasperation: "I just wish they'd *get it on* and *get it over with!*"

Meanwhile Polly was drifting into the same rebellious but fundamentally subservient relationship with Carl, the leader of the new band, that she'd had with Wilbur. I got tired of hearing stories about what a pig Carl was.

"Why don't you tell him to fuck off? Either he does it your way or you sing with someone else! After all, it's your song!"

"I know, but it's like his band, you know? I mean somebody has to sort of run things."

I asked her if she was going to let guys fuck her over all her life, the way Janis Joplin and Billie Holiday had, and if so she might as well have her vocal cords extracted right now for all the good they'd do her. She started to cry.

"I can't help it, Gracie. I'm afraid of guys. They always seem so sure of themselves. Even when they're being completely stupid and fucked, you know what I mean? They never think about anything. They just yell and stomp around and hit things, and they're really like obtuse, you know? And I get intimidated. I've seen guys really beat up on someone just because she said what she thought and they couldn't think of an answer." She was sobbing. "I don't want to get hurt!"

I realized how young she was, and how little prepared for the life she was leading. I comforted her and held her for a long time, and later, when she'd calmed down, I suggested that she come with me to the dojo and start training. I didn't think she'd be very good at it, but I thought it would help center her and give her confidence.

What I didn't foresee was that she would become a complete addict and start treating me like an oracle. She was, as I expected, almost devoid of natural skills and terribly frightened. But most of the guys were nice to her, for obvious reasons, and there were other beginners who weren't that much better than she was. But a real revelation occurred, apparently, the first time she saw me throw a couple of big guys around and take a few falls myself. Unfortunately it wasn't the revelation I would have hoped for. Instead of realizing that she had the same potential within herself, she decided that I was some sort of superior being and developed a huge schoolgirl crush. I suppose one can be the pathway to the other, but all I could see was that she was quite prepared to follow me everywhere and hang on my every hiccup. It was a royal pain in the ass. And her calling me Gracie, which I'd thought was kind of cute before, began to grate on me. But the more irritable I got, the more she tried to please me; if it had gone on all summer I think I'd have killed her. Fortunately it was at just about this time that we became aware of our neighbors.

We had a fairly large backyard, separated by a thick lilac hedge from the more extensive one next door. (Both properties were apparently owned by the same man, whom we never saw.) The house next door was currently occupied by two young bachelors, one blond, one brunette, whom we habitually referred to as Blondie and Bruno. Every morning they dashed off to work, each in his tailored suit and immaculately groomed car, but on the weekends, when they sat around the yard in their running shorts and T-shirts, drinking beer and shouting and guffawing mindlessly—usually encouraged by a pair of tittering young women who were always a cut or two below them in education and social class—they seemed like typical necro frat boys. Polly was quite taken with Bruno, who was the leaner, quieter, and better-looking of the two—Blondie being the kind of affable mesomorph who would puff out after a few more years of beer, beef, and Häagen-Dazs.

There was also a housekeeper: a huge bearlike man who seemed to be a bit simpleminded. He looked most at home gardening, but he apparently did the housework, too, since I could hear the vacuum cleaner, dishwasher, and other appliances every morning after the boys had left. They were rarely home in the evenings during the week, but he would be out in the garden until dark, weeding and trimming and watering. This housekeeper lived in, it seemed—after dark there was always a light in a small third-floor window. I always wondered what he did there, since I couldn't imagine his being capable of reading and there was no flickering light from a TV.

On weekends, when the boys were hanging out in the yard (often in more ways than one), he was at their beck and call, and they took maximal advantage of the fact, continually sending him on errands to fetch this and carry that—especially when they had women there. He never seemed to mind and always obeyed quietly, without a trace of sullenness, no matter how obnoxious and juvenile they became. For this reason I nicknamed him the Admirable Cretin, although his name was apparently Bill.

He was an odd sort of servant to have. There's money in Belmont, but for people in our neighborhood "servant" meant a woman who came once a week to clean. Blondie and Bruno could afford it and were much too infantile to take care of themselves, but the house was only a little larger than ours, and a hulking male servant-of-all-trades seemed out of place.

In appearance the A.C. was intimidating. He was about six-feet-three, two hundred forty pounds, and barrel-chested, with a mass of curly brown hair and a bushy beard. He looked like what in Las Lunas we call a "mountain man"—a term usually applied to any large countrified alcoholic with a full beard, especially if accompanied by a "mountain woman"—typically a lobotomized doormat working for a degree in terminal masochism. But the A.C. showed no signs of tippling and was always unaccompanied. He seemed to exist for the sole purpose of serving Blondie and Bruno. It must have been a horrible life.

One weekend morning toward the middle of July I was lying out in the yard reading and trying to extract some skin cancer from a gray New England sun. The boys were yukking it up next door, and after a while I gathered, from occasional odd lacunae in the flow of

inanity, that they had become aware of my presence. This was confirmed a few minutes later when a soft plop on the grass next to me materialized as a Frisbee. I groaned, reluctant to believe that even they would stoop to the overthrown Frisbee gambit. I heard Blondie, who liked to play at being a southerner, call out to the A.C.: "Billiboah!"

But before the A.C. could respond, Bruno muttered, "Never mind, idiot!" and a moment later there was a rustle as he slid through a gap in the hedge. He smiled in a parody of neighborliness laced with erotic possibilities. Still, he had nice, dark, hot eyes, hollow cheeks, and a sullen, sexy mouth.

"Hi! Sorry to intrude on your privacy like this. Wind caught the old Frisbee."

I smiled back neutrally. "Try using more wrist."

He paused, momentarily derailed. "You here for the summer?"

"Yes, we're subletting."

"Well, it's a nice neighborhood. You from this area or—"

"California."

"You won't find many hot tubs around here!" he announced jovially.

"Good. The last one I was in I got crabs." I made vigorous scratches at my bikini. I don't know what possessed me, but it was effective. He backed off uneasily.

"Well, if you ever need anything—"

"Do you have any Kwell?"

"Uh . . . no. I'm afraid not."

"It's okay, I have to go out anyway."

He picked up the Frisbee. "Well, like I said. . . ." He hesitated. "We're having a barbecue tomorrow. If you and your . . . friends would like to join us. . . . My name's Jack, by the way."

"Grace. Thanks, I'll see what their plans are. Sounds like fun."

Now that I'd backed him off I could give my curiosity full rein. You can take it as a symptom of how bored I was, but they weren't the first dull people who have acquired undeserved glamour by having unusual servants. Think what a bore Manderly would have been without Mrs. Danvers creeping about. So I talked everyone into going to the barbecue. I can't say I regretted it.

Progress

YOU CAN PROBABLY tell by now that I'm kind of an intuitive person. Lots of things that other people think out real carefully—weighing the "facts" on both sides and everything before making a move—just seem obvious to me. I can't say I've ever regretted any of my snap decisions, although you might say that having been hospitalized doesn't make me a walking testimonial. But when I was hospitalized I wasn't acting on my intuition. Some people get into trouble by being overconfident and doing a lot of stupid things. I get into trouble by feeling so stupid that I don't dare do anything at all. So in a way, trusting my intuition is for me a sign of mental health. But I can't recommend it for everybody.

I knew Louise was kind of tricky, but I just couldn't help trusting her. So when I finally got inside Steinkopf the first thing I wanted to do was tell Louise. And the last thing I wanted to do was create a

situation where she and Grace would have a big fight. But there was no way I could make that call without Grace there. She was already pretty mad at me for making the other calls without her, which I guess she saw as further evidence of my wimpiness.

Louise sounded pleased that I'd made it inside, and she gave me some suggestions about how to get around the effect of the fluorescent lights and other sources of boredom. She also told me how to visualize the insides of files and gave me a few clues about the kinds of things I should look for. But she seemed even more gratified when I told her how I'd been distracted by the tiny spiders.

"You saw the spider! That's real good! You're doin' all right, Taylor. He knows you saw him, though, so it may not be so easy next time. Try to ignore him if you can. He won't hurt you. But it would be a little better if he didn't know you could see him. Keep everybody happy that way."

Then Grace got on the phone. "Louise, I'm thinking about going back to Las Lunas. Can you give me one good reason why I shouldn't?"

"Miss a lot of fun."

"If this is fun I can miss it. What I want to know is will I be in trouble back home?"

"I can't make you guarantees, Captain. I don't know everything, you know."

"You know a lot more than you're telling us, that's for goddamn sure! You owe us something, Louise! We did you a favor and now we're exiles!"

There was a long pause. "I don't know any other way to go, Captain. You're safe where you are now, knowin' what you know. I'd like to leave it that way. Just wait a little. Time Taylor gets through you'll probably know as much as I do, so keep your pants on." She chuckled loudly. "Can't get much wiser than that. And there'll be so much going on you'll wish you were back there being bored."

"Is that supposed to reassure me?"

But I could see that it had. Grace relaxed, like a cat after a long bout with a piece of string. Louise never said more than she needed to and she'd found the magic words. Even Grace believed Louise wouldn't lie.

"She'll tell the truth and nothing but the truth," she said later. "She just never tells the whole truth."

We were sharing our separate conversations.

"Take the spider, for example," Grace went on. "How did she know about it? Who is it? Why is it a 'he'? I bet she has a whole bunch of other people flying around in there, just like last time, in case we fail."

I hadn't thought of that possibility and it upset me to think I was only one among many. Possibly even superfluous, since at least one had gotten in ahead of me and was obviously more important given that I was to keep out of his way and not upset him. It didn't do much for my motivation; the next day I barely got inside and couldn't focus my attention on anything. I spent the whole time goofing around: sitting in ashtrays, riding on cigarette smoke, diving between people's legs, flying through walls. . . .

I didn't see the spider, although there were other bugs—flies, mosquitoes, gnats, ants. Some of them seemed out of place in an air-conditioned building. I tried to ignore them like Louise had said, but it wasn't easy. Whenever I "looked" at one too long it would start looking spidery to me, which helped to remind me to stop. I wondered if any of these insects were "him." There was never more than one to a room, which made me suspicious.

The only thing I accomplished that day was that for the first time I found myself listening to people's conversations. I didn't find out anything all that exciting—just that they called the project as a whole "Donald Duck" (after Direct Unchanneled Communication), and Steinkopf "The Duck Pond," and that they had a pet subject they called "Iris," who apparently was capable of extraordinary psychic feats that weren't specified.

I don't know why I suddenly was able to do this—I mean, why I suddenly *wanted* to. Everything is so chancy when you're out of the body: Long-range, thought-out, conscious goals just evaporate and everything's governed by whim. I would never get to Steinkopf until a half dozen other impulses had been gratified, for example. I wondered if animals felt like that. Like cats and dogs, when they start out to do something and then stop and look confused, and you know they've forgotten what it was they wanted. I wondered what it was that made me start "listening."

Grace had her own theory about it: "Competition, sweetheart, that's what it was."

"Competition? With whom?"

"The spider. The insects. 'Him.' Whatever he's doing, he's listening, right?"

"How do you get that?"

"Bug. He's a bug. In the unconscious all those puns are the real thing."

"Well. . . ."

"What do you say when you're wishing you could overhear something? 'I wish I could be a fly on the wall.' Right? So that's what 'he' was. A fly on the wall. So when you realized that—realized 'he' was listening—you started listening, too. You sneak! I didn't think you had a competitive bone in your tender little body!"

"Wait a minute—"

"But you do, you do! Listen, I'm glad! Because *I* certainly do! If Louise had laid that rap on me I'd have been in there snooping my brains out!"

"But I'm not—"

"In *fact* . . . I'll bet that's why she did it! Since when does Louise volunteer information? She told you about 'him' just to help you get motivated, the old witch! I'll bet she's got 'him' crazy jealous, too!"

I wasn't sure I bought it, but I progressed a lot faster after that. I thought it was because of a dream I had that night.

It was another alchemist dream. I was getting to the point where I could recognize them right off: They all had the same quiet, still feeling about them—like walking through a vast, dark cathedral and hearing the echo of your footsteps. There was a feeling of being drawn in—of a secret that pulled and attracted me.

I was in the subway station at Harvard Square, standing on a kind of turntable that was slowly turning around counterclockwise. All around the edge of the turntable were tunnel openings—entrances to trains and buses that went in every direction. I was supposed to get off when I got to my tunnel, but the tunnels weren't marked and I didn't know which one to take. Many were still under construction and filled with rubble. Finally I saw one that had a big "N" over it, but before we got to it the turntable stopped and the loudspeaker blared out "Casco!" I hesitated. Did I want to go to Casco? Where

was it? Then the loudspeaker shouted "GET OFF!" So I did, and walked into the tunnel. It was pretty dark but wide, spacious, and clean. There was no sign of a train, but I could hear them all around, roaring and muttering. When I came to the end of the tunnel, I found another, smaller one opening to one side. This led to another still smaller one, and so on, until finally I was in a passageway only two feet wide and three feet high. At the far end I could see a little light, and I slithered toward it gratefully. When I got to the light I saw a small rickety wooden table against a wall with a candle on it, guttering. The tunnel had ended. I heard someone humming, but I couldn't see anyone.

Behind the candle on the table there were three books. I tried to make out the titles. The middle one was completely obscured by the candle, and of the outside ones all I could see was the word "Ring" on the first and "King" on the third. I reached forward to push the candle aside so that I could see the middle title, but as I did a hand fell on my wrist. It had long, skinny fingers emerging from a dun-colored sleeve. As I looked at it something caught the corner of my eye. I turned in time to see the middle book disappearing and another taking its place, guided by another skinny hand. As it slid gently into place, discharging little clouds of dust into the dead air, a host of tiny spiders dropped down from the edges of the books and scrambled off into the darkness, muttering and grumbling at the inconvenience, like arteriosclerotic hospital patients on cleaning day.

The hand was gone from my wrist, freeing me to move the candle so I could see the middle book. The title was *On Death and Dying*.

This made me furious. I shouted, "Come out! Come out!" But there was no answer. Then I quite literally hit the roof. Only the roof disappeared, and I shot hundreds of feet into the air. Everything was bathed in a brilliant blue—a bright ocean dotted with hundreds of islands. Directly below me was a large island covered with trees. The ruins of a house stood on the far end, and there were some buildings that looked like barracks scattered about. Far across the water to my right was a large rock with a lighthouse on it, and beyond that, open ocean. Before me was a long jagged coastline of long peninsulas with equally long bays interspersed. To my left and a little bit behind me was some sort of large seaport. None of this had a dreamlike look. I had the feeling I was in a three-dimensional environment. But when

I turned to look more closely at it, a huge wind came up and blew darkness over everything.

I woke up feeling angry. I felt as if someone had deliberately frustrated me. I grabbed a pen and stubbornly began writing the dream down, determined to hang on to every clue I had. It crossed my mind that this is the sort of attitude that helps convince people I'm crazy, but I was too angry to care. As far as I was concerned, there was an important reality in that dream that I was close to discovering, and someone, even if it was only me, was trying to prevent it.

The first problem was the book. I knew that *On Death and Dying* was a substitution. It felt like somebody trying to frighten me off. Like the tyrannosaurus in the first dream. I talked the dream over with Grace at breakfast, but she couldn't throw any light on it. She turned to the others, who were engrossed in the morning paper.

"I have a trivia question. What book trilogy has 'Ring' in the title of the first book and 'King' in the third?"

"Oh, I hate things like that!" Polly shuddered. "It's like something you'd get on an SAT."

Bran mumbled something through his croissant.

"What?"

"Tolkien. It's *The Lord of the Rings*. First book is *The Fellowship of the Ring;* the third is *The Return of the King*."

"What's the second?"

"The second? I can't remember. It's that extraneous one that drags it out to three volumes. Never liked it anyway."

No one else remembered, either. I hadn't read it in fifteen years, and Polly and Grace never had.

"It's a boy's book," Grace pronounced, dismissing it to that limbo whither all irredeemably patriarchal products were sentenced. "Call the library."

Polly dutifully ran to do so after carefully copying down the other titles. Meanwhile I pursued another line of inquiry.

"Is there a town called 'Casco' around here?" I asked Bran.

"Casco? Not that I know of."

"Look it up in the atlas," Grace said a little impatiently. She was in one of her morning moods.

There was a huge atlas in the living room bookcase and I went to get it. When I came back Bran had left to get dressed and Grace was doing the dishes in that noisy way people have when they'd rather someone else were doing them. Polly shouted that the library line was busy and she had to run because she wanted to ride into town with Bran. Grace broke a dish and swore. I opened the atlas.

It was one of those comprehensive ones that indexes every town, lake, river, and mountain in the world in alphabetical order. There were only three Cascos. The first was a town in Wisconsin.

"It's not that," Grace said decidedly. "Too far away. Besides, it's not northeast."

"Why does it have to be northeast?"

"One of your tunnels had an 'N' over it. Like a compass. You got off just before and you were going counterclockwise. That's northeast. Or close to it."

I tried to visualize the turntable.

"North by east. Or north-northeast," I decided.

"Whatever. It's not Wisconsin."

"There's one in Maine."

"That's more like it."

"But it's not on the coast."

"What else?"

"Casco Bay, also in Maine."

She abandoned the dishes, and we pored over the map together. There was an insert map of Portland that showed the bay very clearly. Portland was obviously the large port I had seen on my left, and the many islands and elongated peninsulas were recognizable on the map.

"This is it! I was there!"

"Taylor, darling, what were you doing vacationing in Maine without inviting me?"

"It was one of these islands! I've dreamed about them before!"

"So what's in Maine?"

"I don't know. Something."

"The book!" She went to try the library again, while I tried to pin down the island I had been on. There were two or three likely candidates. One called Long Island, one called Shutter Island, and

one called Bailey's Island. It was hard for me to judge angles very well, looking at a map, but I was sure it had to be one of them.

Grace came back from the phone looking triumphant. It was obviously good for her to be able to take some kind of action. I felt a twinge of guilt that I couldn't share my journeys with her. They certainly would have been more fun.

"The Two Towers," she announced. "The librarian didn't even have to look it up."

She looked at me expectantly, and I could see my own blank response reflected in her fading smile. "No?"

I shook my head. "Doesn't mean a thing to me."

"Maybe it's some kind of landmark. Or maybe it's what's *inside* the book." She sighed. "Maybe I should read it."

So Grace went off to the library and I went to my room to prepare for my daily trip to Steinkopf.

Whether Grace's competition theory was right or whether it was the frustration of the dream, I had never found myself so eager before—so hungry to get at Steinkopf's secrets. It turned out to be a very productive morning. I zipped around from room to room, listening to conversations, watching experiments, slipping into cabinets and reading files, exploring desk drawers, and so on. I found out quite a bit.

There were five kinds of experiments going on at Steinkopf. The first had to do with clairvoyant spying. They had a half dozen well-known psychics in there and were testing their ability to envision Russian missile installations. They would give them a name, or show them a spot on the map, and ask them to visualize the place. Sometimes these clairvoyants were able to reproduce the setting with devastating accuracy, but their reliability left much to be desired. Like me, they were easily bored with mechanical chores and dry, dead things like missiles, and tended to see field mice, wild grasses, and cloud formations as of more strategic importance in the grand scheme of things. They would slip backward and forward in time seeking less trashy surroundings: Where the installation was supposed to be they would visualize the scene thirty years in the past, when there was nothing there but a wheat field.

The second project dealt with transmitting messages by extrasen-

sory means. This would be handy for communicating with submarine captains or covert intelligence agents in enemy countries. Unfortunately it was extremely difficult to control the content of the messages. Extrasensory communication was designed, according to Louise, to carry information of profound emotional significance. Psychics trying to transmit code numbers and letters discovered they were sending a lot of other things instead: headaches, colds, rage, tears, sexual fantasies, child memories, and life's most embarrassing moments. Besides being frustrating to the researchers, it was kind of hard on the folks at the receiving end. But who wants to talk about numbers when you've got these more pressing things on your mind? And why talk to complete strangers when you've got lots of people you really *want* to "reach out and touch"? They had one psychic who was brilliant at finding exciting visual ways of transmitting coded information, but the only one who ever picked it up was his mother, who wasn't at all happy about it. She said that at eighty-two years old she had better things to do than get up in the middle of the night and copy down unintelligible messages, and that if he was going to communicate with her he might at least wait till she was awake and tell her something she was interested in hearing, like if he loved her and whether he was eating right.

A third group of experimenters were studying what they called "telehypnosis"—trying to influence behavior at a distance. It was a kind of psychic equivalent of nerve gas or the early experiments with the military applications of LSD.

The fourth project concerned a rare form of psychokinesis—the ability to start fires without the use of material tinder. They felt that this could be an extremely useful skill in covert operations of all kinds, especially dealing with peasant uprisings or any kind of guerrilla force.

But there was a fifth project, more secret than any of these, and experts from each of the other four were working on it without having a clear idea of what it was about. It concerned the psychic they called "Iris," and was always referred to as "Wyatt Earp."

When I got back I felt elated. Familiarity lent a more attractive air to the place, and each little victory made subsequent ones easier. I was beginning to know the researchers a little bit—their per-

sonalities, biases, foibles, and weirdnesses—and dry reports and numbers were taking on the more interesting hues of personal ambition, competition, jealousy, hatred, and greed.

Steinkopf was relatively free of insect life this particular morning. I only saw one little brown spider in one room, and he disappeared the moment I noticed him.

The Barbecue

THE DAYS PASSED with excruciating languor. I read *The Two Towers* for Taylor without achieving any illumination, and then began finding other excuses to go to the library. It was degrading. Here was Bran working at his project in the Widener stacks at Harvard while I was moping about in a little town library. To tell you the truth, I've always felt drawn to local libraries. College libraries are an unhealthy mixture of dedicated pedants and reluctant adolescents, but local libraries give you a whole community in microcosm: parents, children, old people, and lots of eccentrics. Taylor can't understand it. He says he'd feel guilty going there every day and never buying anything.

Meanwhile all this idleness was making me horny. I had a big crush on Tsubaki and fantasized about him a lot. I thought I could probably seduce him if I tried, but he had a wife and two small

children and who needs trouble like that? Besides, it might interfere with the training relationship. There are lots of good potential lovers in the world, but a good aikido *sensei* is hard to find.

So I latched on to the most attractive of the necro males in the dojo and made a fuss over how good his aikido was getting, even though he was only a blue belt. We went out for a beer after practice, and one thing led to another. He was a little intimidated and I had to tone myself down a whole lot, but all in all he wasn't bad for a one-night stand (which is what he turned out to be), and by pretending he was Tsubaki most of the night I managed to have a pretty good time. I was already congratulating myself for having found a nice, safe, uncomplicated sexual friendship to season the summer doldrums, when he informed me hesitantly that he was going on a month-long camping trip with some friends and did I want to go? I think he was relieved when I declined, but I thought it was sweet of him to ask me on such brief acquaintance. So I was back to square one, ripe for folly.

Which brings me, all unwilling, to the night of the barbecue. At the appointed hour the four of us filed through the hedge to meet what turned out to be five of them: Bruno (a.k.a. Jack), Blondie (whose real name was Pat), two young female secretaries—one tall and sandy-haired, the other small and dark, both dressed to the nines—and the Admirable Cretin hulking in the background. We approached each other like opposing athletic teams. Bruno and I—captains by force of circumstance—did the inanities and then we got down to serious reconnoitering.

Bruno moved in on yours truly right away: "You know, I just can't picture you in California, somehow. You don't seem the type."

"What type is that?" I asked innocently. "California extends as far as from here to Georgia, and it's far more diverse than the East Coast—topographically, ecologically, and culturally. You'll have to be more specific."

"You're kidding, aren't you?"

"I never joke about geography. It's one topic I hold sacred. Geography and chocolate mousse are not subjects for levity."

"It's really tiresome getting stereotyped all the time," Polly put in bravely. She had attached herself to me so she could flirt with Bruno

in greater safety. She was like a fox cub—scampering out for little sallies and ready to dive back under mama's belly if things began to look dangerous. But Bruno paid no attention to her at all.

"You know what I mean! Don't you?" Bruno continued.

"I hope not," I smiled.

The A.C. was now taking orders and serving drinks, which looked deceptively small in his huge hands. I decided to stick with wine.

"What brings you to Belmont?" Bruno asked, moving on to easier ground.

I made up some plausible story, embellished in spots by Polly. She was displaying her vulnerable appeal to good advantage, and this soon drew Pat into the group.

"You a singer, honey?" he asked, widening his faded blue jellyfish eyes in a caricature of neighborly interest. "Maybe you could give us a little number later."

Bran closed in now, eyeing Pat as if he were a triangular fin that had suddenly appeared in quiet water.

"It's my day off, thanks," Polly said, looking at Bruno.

We seemed to be on the way to becoming a single group. Pat's girlfriend, Ginger, now joined us. She was one of those coarse, friendly, top-heavy women—all hair, shoulders, and bosom—who look as if they might topple over at any moment and invariably heighten the effect—and their center of gravity—by wearing perilous heels no matter what the terrain. In Ginger's case the illusion of instability was enhanced by her having had a running start on the booze. Ginger cozied up to Bran whether in reaction to Pat's transparent lust for Polly or due to that hopeless longing that so frequently compels boisterous women in their cups to pursue elegant, fastidious men. This left Taylor—never one to push himself into the middle of a party—and Bruno's girlfriend, Maud, a short, dark, sly, impish woman with what my mother always called a "cute figure." (At puberty, when I was tall and gawky and thought every part of my body either too big or too little, I realized this meant "nothing too much.")

When Taylor wandered off to the food table to nibble and pretend to drink, I saw Maud take off after him, which relieved my mind on two counts. Meanwhile the A.C. had been tending the barbecue

with Zen-like concentration, as if he were watching each nodule of hamburger meat turn brown before his eyes, and each stretch of chicken skin start to blister.

In the larger group everybody was trying to impress somebody who was new to them without completely nauseating somebody who wasn't, and in the process of groping to achieve the former they were falling down badly on the latter. Pat, in fact, was spreading *mal de mer* even among those who were strangers to him. Pat was one of those classic necro alcoholics who had depleted his entire fund of creativity in high school, throwing a shopping cart off a bridge. At some point in his social career he had convinced himself that the soul of wit was not brevity but talking loudly in a mock southern accent, and when his sallies failed to provoke laughter he concluded that the cause of this miscarriage was insufficient volume. He now strove to rectify the oversight, capitalizing on the group's increasing hunger:

"Billiboah! Wheah's the meat!"

The A.C. wordlessly carried two already heaping platters of cooked chicken and hamburger to the table, demonstrating to all but Pat the redundance of the request. We crowded around and began loading plates and building bun constructions. Taylor was pouring quite a lot of barbecue sauce on his hamburger, and Ginger was appalled.

"How can you ruin good meat with all that glop!"

Taylor looked up, surprised. "What do you use?"

"Salt and pepper. A little ketchup, maybe."

"I don't like ketchup."

"A-1 sauce!" Pat bellowed. "That's the best!"

"*Chacun à son* goo!" Bran said cheerfully.

Polly was mortified. "Eeew! Bran, that was really lame!" She smiled at Bruno while Bran downed his drink stubbornly.

"Speaking of goo," Bruno announced, assuming the air of a well-organized host about to present his assembled guests with a conversational entrée they could really get their teeth into, "Maud dragged me to the goddamnedest so-called art show yesterday! Now, I want your opinion on this: This guy—"

"Don't parade your ignorance, Jack," Maud called over.

"Wait a minute, now, Maud. I want to get an unbiased opinion here. This guy takes an *object*—plain, everyday junk he finds around,

like a leaf, a piece of scrunched-up paper, a carrot, a Styrofoam cup. Then he dips it in lard so it's all gooey. Then he sprays it with some kind of clear lacquer and sticks it on a pedestal. Can you believe that? And people *buy* it!" He ushered everyone to a rough circle of chairs.

"Don't be such a bozo, Jack." Maud turned to Taylor. "Some of them are real striking."

"The rotten cabbage? You call that striking? I'm telling you, some of that stuff really stinks, in more ways than one."

"Eeeew!" said Polly.

Bran decided it was time to stake out his territory, which was fast slipping away. "Well, you see, a lot of artists today are trying to get away from permanence—trying to reflect their culture, in which everything, after all, is temporary, except ugliness, noise, and chemicals, which seem to be relatively permanent. So the organic things are ephemeral, the lacquer remains. Decay on the inside, shine on the outside. A perfect metaphor for modern society!"

Polly was not impressed. "It's still gross."

"Who'd want a rotten cabbage in their living room?" Ginger asked tipsily. "I've got enough stuff like that in my refrigerator! At least I think I do. I'm never home long enough to look." She laughed lecherously and elbowed Bran in the ribs. "Listen, if that artist . . . what's his name?"

"That's another thing," said Bruno, happy for the cue. "This guy calls himself 'Saint Fran Crisco.' How's that for a hype? You have to admit he's got a good PR man."

"Crisco! Whoa! I love it!" Ginger shrieked. "Well, tell Crisco if he wants raw material all he has to do is check out my refrigerator."

"Now, listen to this," Bruno went on. "Maud tells me this guy's got the critics falling all over themselves to pat him on the back! Can you explain to me what this is all about?"

Bran had been dancing in his corner. Now he threw off his robe.

"You can't judge art," he began, "apart from the culture that creates it—"

"Right!" I interrupted. "Sick culture, rotten art!"

"But you can't *call* it rotten art!"

Until Bran jumped in I was ready to defend Crisco or any other schmuck Bruno saw fit to attack, but I couldn't stand watching Bran fall into that awful pomposity he assumed whenever he saw Polly

slipping away from him. So I abruptly switched sides. "Who says I can't?"

"Doesn't it make you at all nervous that great artists of every period have been rejected and scorned by their contemporaries?"

"Not at all. Artists today suffer from too *little* scorn. Every mediocre cluck with one half-baked idea and a flair for publicity is instantly lionized by simpering art critics who are terrified of being caught behind the times."

"Raht on, little darlin'!" Pat cheered. Which brought me up short. What was I doing, tossing my lot in with a know-nothing like Pat, whose idea of wit consisted of pretending to be the red-neck he really was? But I was pissed at Bran for taking such a conventionally safe position.

"But can't you see?" Bran went on. "He's trying to transcend the subject-object relationship—recontextualizing known objects in a way that both invites and begrudges participation!" Ginger's jaw dropped at least seven inches, Maud smiled enigmatically, Bruno stared, Polly snorted, and Pat squinted suspiciously. Encouraged, Bran plunged ahead. "Art of this kind epitomizes a zero-style vernacular—with the minimum of elaboration compatible with total plausibility. You can see that, can't you?" There was a flurry of hesitant nods and thoughtful drinking. "You see, in most traditional art the meaning precedes the creation of the work or is somehow immanent or develops in the process of creation. But here the meaning *follows*—"

"You mean," I cut in, "it isn't worth shit until some windbag has had a chance to pontificate on it, to couch it in whatever philosophical babble is *au courant*. That's why critics love these people! They're conversation pieces! It's too threatening for people today to *experience* things—they just want to talk about them."

I hadn't meant to be quite that insulting, but it only spurred Bran on to deliver another flurry of buzzwords. Since the audience was threatening to drift away Bruno decided to drop another coin in the machine.

"We saw another real hot one, too," he said. "This guy paints regular pictures—"

"Super-realism," Maud interjected. "Unbelievably ugly."

"—then takes them and wraps them in blood-soaked bandages—

he claims it's his own blood—and then titles them: 'Wounded Painting #37' and so on. Can you beat that? But at least he put some kind of work into it."

"Not to mention his own blood," Bran added. "I think that counts for something. Blood, sweat, toil. . . . We'll just have to assume the tears. But really, it *is* a statement—"

I pounced. "Statement! That's just the problem! It's all intellectual!"

"Hey, look," said Pat, finally relinquishing the accent to everyone's relief, "if the guy can make a buck wrapping junk in bandages, more power to him!" He waved his beer in a toast.

"That's certainly what it's all about," I said, relieved to find him no longer on my side. "Money and ego. Do some silly thing that's never been done before and capture the critics' attention. If you can't do anything well, do something new. It's *Guinness Book of Records* art. I feel sorry for the artists of tomorrow. They'll have to content themselves with standing on the shoulders of midgets."

Bran was scandalized. "I can't believe you, Grace! I never thought to hear you putting down the avant-garde!"

"What is this 'avant-garde' crap? Since when is art a military expedition? Novelty is the academic art of our era. Do you seriously believe in your heart of hearts that anyone's going to give a bird's turd for this crap in a hundred years—if anybody's around?"

I could see Bruno was enjoying my tirade, a clear indication that the relevance to his own personality was lost on him. Taylor was looking remote. Maud was smiling enigmatically. Pat had that half-smug, half-nasty look that necro men get whenever they encounter a woman more articulate than they are and can't decide whether to patronize or bash them. Polly was bored and went over to talk to the A.C., who made a quiet exit before she could get there.

"Well, I sure as hell hope *I'm* not around!" Ginger blurted out, glad at last to find a concept she could grasp. She nudged Bran, who was not to be distracted, even though he'd already lost the only audience he really cared about.

"But really, Grace, you can't just dismiss a whole category and say it isn't art!"

"I didn't say it wasn't art; I just said it was garbage. So is most art in every era. What I don't like about people like Crisco is that they

don't involve themselves with nature out of love—they just want to fuck around with it and control it and manipulate it and exploit it for their own petty vanity. They're just real-estate developers on a small scale."

Ginger saw an opening here. "Well, I don't know about that. I've got an uncle who's a developer, and he's a really nice guy. You can't lump everybody together in the same category." She looked at Bran for approval. "I think there's room for all kinds of people. We've got to be tolerant of differences. Especially today. Don't you think?"

"Oh, absolutely!" Bran was completely oblivious to Ginger's pride in what for her was a Sunday-best thought. "I couldn't agree more! Invite an axe murderer to lunch!"

I wanted to kill him. Ginger was devastated, her ghastly self-concept utterly confirmed.

"Don't be stupid, Bran! She's right. What are we talking about all this crap for anyway! We're here to have a good time!" I grabbed Ginger and took her over to the table for another drink. The minute I did I regretted it, since she was already well on the way to becoming a really sloppy drunk. She poured herself a stiff one while I got another glass of wine.

"Make one for Bran," I suggested. "I'm sorry he's being such a prick. He gets that way when he's trying to impress somebody. If you get him loaded he'll loosen up."

She took a big gulp, shook her head, and smiled gamely.

"It's okay. I guess he's just used to a . . . different kind of person."

"He's not used to anything. He's just stupid sometimes."

"He sure is gorgeous though."

"Hey, Ginger!" Pat shouted. "Lay off the juice! I want some action tonight! I've already seen your snoring-corpse impression!"

"Forget it, Pat! Who could stay awake looking at you?" She turned to me and made a face. "You can see why somebody with a little couth appeals to me."

"How do you know Pat?" I asked.

"I tried to get a job at his company once. We all work at different electronics firms out on Route 128. Jack and Pat have been friends for a long time. I've only known them a few months."

"And Maud?"

"Likewise. She's nice but kind of hard to know." She took another gulp. "She has some funny ideas."

"About what?"

"Jack and Pat. She says I shouldn't tell them things."

"Like what?"

"Forget it. I talk too much. Even Pat says I have a big mouth. Talk about the pot and the kettle!" She looked wistfully at Bran. "I guess us kitchen utensils better stay together. So long, hon. Thanks for sticking up for me." She tottered over to Pat, who was entertaining Taylor and Maud with glowing prognoses for the computer industry.

I veered off to the other small circle, bent on giving Bran a piece of my mind. But he looked so unhappy watching Polly fawn over Bruno that I didn't have the heart. Bruno was recounting some youthful adventure and Polly was listening raptly. He was just the kind of man an inexperienced kid like Polly would fall for: handsome; dark curly hair; lean, tight, wiry body; a little on the short side; very hidden, very sure of himself, alert to anybody's feelings as long as they were relevant to his own immediate motives—utterly insensitive otherwise. All punctuated with flashes of warmth that could make you forget just how cold he really was. Very attractive poison, in other words—fun in small amounts but toxic and habit-forming in large ones. One of those guys who lost his heart at the age of five and filled the empty space with an extra set of teeth. I decided I'd better keep an eye on my little protégée while I still had some influence over her. Bruno paid homage to my arrival by cutting his story short.

"Just telling about some of the dumb things I did when I was a kid."

"Don't let me stop you. I like hearing people's dumb-kid stories. Makes me feel better about my own."

"At least you are close enough to remember," Bran said moodily as he left to get another drink. I was shocked. He had already drunk enough to loosen the straps of his maternal tongue: The "l" in "least" took him three times longer to say than the rest of the word, and the

sound emerged impartially from under both sides of the back of his tongue. I hadn't heard the accent since Helen died and I wondered if this meant his long period of mourning her was coming to an end.

At this point the evening got confused. Most of the time we were all split up in shifting duets and trios. Bran gave up on Polly and started paying court to Maud and Ginger. Ginger soaked it up with sloppy gratitude, but it was hard to detach Maud from Taylor for very long, and Taylor was pretty much of a stick when she wasn't around. Pat started pursuing Polly again, who was pursuing Bruno, who I had to assume was pursuing me, because every time I turned around, there he was. I wondered if he had misconstrued my desire to keep Polly from getting entangled. He was being sweeter than I thought him capable of being and turned out to have a pretty decent sense of humor for a frat boy.

There were only two other incidents of note before the party broke up. The first occurred late in the evening, when I saw Maud start to go into the house and caught up with her.

"If you're heading for the john, show me the way."

"How come you gals can't go to the head alone, eh?" Pat shouted out. "You think we got a snake in the toilet?"

"If you're wondering how I can stand him," Maud said wryly, "I can't. And no, I don't know how Ginger and Jack do. Jack's bad enough," she added.

"But you—"

"But I. Yes. He's cute, lots of money, doesn't mind spending it. Is Taylor your boyfriend?"

"We're just friends."

"That's good. I like him. A nice change from Jack."

"What's wrong with Jack?"

"Aside from being an asshole, you mean?"

I nodded, noncommittally.

"Isn't that enough?"

"My friend Polly has a pretty big crush on him. I don't want her to get hurt."

"'My friend, Polly,' as in 'I've got a friend who's pregnant?'" It was snide, but she gave me such a wicked little smile I couldn't even get mad. Besides, it was the opening I wanted.

"Ginger hinted at something about Pat and Jack that she said came from you."

"Ginger talks too much and so do I. None of you work in an electronics firm, do you?"

"No."

"Then it doesn't affect you."

"What would you have said if I'd said we did?"

"I'd tell you not to talk as much as I do. Otherwise," she went on, with her little smile, "enjoy yourself."

The second incident came at the very end. Ginger had already passed out once and Pat was steering her into the house, yelling good night as he went. Bruno was in a serious huddle with Maud; and Polly, who was pretty drunk, too, and not very happy about the way the evening had gone, said good night and staggered home to our house. Taylor and I were discussing the possibility that it was time for the rest of us to be leaving, but neither of us was moving. Bran, who had been sitting morosely by himself, came over and joined us.

"You know what?" he said gloomily, his Russian accent thicker than ever. "I have been thinking. You are right. It is crap. All crap."

"What is?" I had no idea what he was talking about.

"This art. I don't know why I'm defending it. It is rotten, decadent, insipid! It has no heart! But what can we do? *Nothing* has any heart! Why pick on art?"

"And why pick on you, right?"

"Me? Pick on me?" He thought about it for a few minutes, drinking moodily. "You are right," he said finally. "Why pick on me?"

"Because you were talking like those idiots on the thesis committee! Why do you *do* that? You never used to do that! Every time Polly gets a little distant!"

"I do?"

He looked at Taylor. Taylor nodded. "Yes, I'm afraid she's right. I thought maybe I didn't know you very well and this was the real you."

"*No!* That is not the real me! *This* . . . is the real me!" He stood up, slapping himself on the chest and staggering back a little. Then he laughed, a deep rich laugh. "I am knocking myself over. I am pride

going before a fall. What has happened to me?"

"You're trying to impress somebody."

He groaned. "I am failing."

"You're a lot more impressive the way you really are."

"And what is that? A drunk? No, my little Gracie, you are wrong this time. I am not impressive at all. I am a stupid old man, pursuing youth. I must stop before I become a complete idiot. It is over for me: 'Leityes, leityes slyozi gorkiya . . . molim so slyezami, so goruchimi! Smilooyeysya! Smilooyeysya!'"

He shook his head, weeping. Taylor and I put our arms around him to comfort him, and he patted our hands gratefully and tried to shake off the gloom.

"You are kind! You are kind!" he said tearfully, getting up with difficulty and extricating himself. "I am drunk. I must go to bed." He kissed us both a little sloppily, waved good night to Bruno and Maud, who were deep in what now began to look like an argument, and went home.

Taylor and I gave each other friendly squeezes. We hadn't had much chance to communicate all evening.

"Looks like you made a conquest," I said.

He nodded happily but didn't say anything, intent on watching the quarrel, which was rapidly heating up though conducted in angry undertones.

"She's pretty cute," I added.

He nodded again, still watching. The argument was particularly fascinating because there was something wrong about it. I couldn't put my finger on it at first, but after a minute or two I realized it was too *even*. There were no loud verbal snatches bursting forth, no words too full of anger to be contained. Suddenly they both stood up.

"Fuck you, then!"

"Asshole!"

And they were apart, Bruno striding over to the table, Maud heading toward us. I didn't believe the fight for some reason—an impression that was enhanced by the little smile on Maud's impish face as she came up to us and took Taylor's hand.

"Mind if I borrow your friend?" she asked me.

"The night is young," I said. Taylor blew me a farewell kiss, and they slipped away through the hedge. I felt a little pang of envy and jealousy and turned to get myself a last glass of wine before leaving. I'd had very little to drink and for the first time was regretting it. But as I turned, Bruno was standing in front of me, smiling and holding out a glass. I took it.

"Will you stay for a while?"

I took a sip. "Sure."

"I have to tell Bill to take all this stuff in. Don't go away."

I nodded, and strolled around the yard, sipping the wine and enjoying the moment of solitude. It was the kind of hot summer night you almost never get in Las Lunas, where the fog always comes in, or at least a sea breeze. I was caught up in the lushness of it: the warm, humid air; the singing insects; a waning moon just coming up; and a profusion of flowering shrubs trying to insinuate their corrupt fragrance into the prevailing orthodoxy of the freshly cut grass. Half the outside lights went out, which brought the night a lot closer. I knew what was coming. I'd made the choice already, and I no longer felt like pretending I was still leaving it open. I sat down in a lounge chair, emptied the glass, and stretched my arms up over the back of the chair, feeling warm and luxurious. My hands touched someone but I didn't jump. I looked up and Bruno was bending over me, his hands on my wrists. I smiled and he bent over farther, sliding his hands up my outstretched arms and down across my shoulders, reaching my breasts just about the time our mouths met. It was a nicely timed sequence and I appreciated it. There was a lot of hungry nibbling, followed by an awkward moment when we decided to get free of the chair and come at each other face to face. I was dimly aware of the A.C. clearing the table and taking things away, and by the time we had abandoned the chair and were face to face on our knees he had turned out the rest of the lights and we were alone on the lawn. Bruno had on a lavender shirt with snaps instead of buttons, which I like because you can rip it open in one motion and it makes a delightful little concatenation to accompany the released aroma of warm flesh. He pulled off my jersey and we spent a few minutes exploring all this new territory.

"Do you mind if I call you Bruno?"

He stopped, a little startled.

"Bruno?"

"I don't know if I can make love to someone called Jack. I always *think* of you as Bruno."

Peter says the reason I'm always giving people special names is because I need to control everything. But I think every relationship should have its own special names, the way they do in some nonliterate societies.

Bruno was very good about it. He murmured breathily that he didn't care what I called him as long as we could keep doing what we were doing. Which at that point was rolling around on the freshly cut lawn licking, kissing, and biting each other a lot, and pulling off each other's jeans. I told him I'd only been kidding about the crabs and he said he didn't care anyway. We were both incredibly excited and not as sensitive as we probably should have been to the fact that we were outdoors in a quiet suburban neighborhood at two o'clock in the morning. I was much too far gone to assess the amount of noise we made, but we must have been pretty vocal because right after we both came a couple of neighborhood dogs started howling, which they usually only do when an ambulance goes by.

Bruno wanted me to stay the night, but I wisely decided that he wouldn't look nearly so delicious to me in the morning. He was gentle and affectionate in between all the wild passion, and I could see he had a tender core buried in him somewhere, but I knew better than to try to bring it out. Deep-sea dredging in the male psyche is a pastime best abandoned young.

So I kissed him good night, slung my clothes over my shoulder, and slipped through the hedge, sandals in hand. I crept into the back door of the house and tiptoed upstairs, planning to take a shower since I was covered with grass stains and dirt and generally a little on the untidy side. But as I was heading toward the bathroom I met Maud coming out. We were both startled at first. We were also both naked.

"Having a nice night?" she whispered.

I nodded. "You?"

"Mmmm!" She closed her eyes and smiled.

"You certainly look it." She was all tousled and dreamy looking. We were very close to each other so as not to wake anyone. She

leaned forward to whisper in my ear, smiling her sly little smile.

"So do you," she murmured. "All mussed like that, with that . . . long lean body . . . all covered with. . . ."

She stopped to kiss a grass stain on my shoulder, then slid her lips up into the softest, deepest place on my neck. I shuddered, and was surprised (maybe not *that* surprised) to feel my hands sliding around her hips. A second later we were pressed together tightly, tongues interlocked to suppress alternating moans and giggles. I quickly pulled her into my room and closed the door.

What started as a bright flame drifted, with repetition, into a long, sensuous glow, and about the time it merged with the rising sun I fell asleep. I dreamed that two fat men were talking, waving their cigars in the air. One was saying, "We put seats on both sides of the aisle and the sea horse gave up his life, but we still don't make any money." Taylor's convinced that somewhere in the galaxy there are beings who actually converse every day the way people do in our dreams. He says all those cryptic remarks are just alien fraggies, and he envisions a day when he'll walk into a store and there'll be someone talking like that and he'll understand him perfectly.

Somewhere in all that lovemaking with Maud there was a quiet moment, lying in each other's arms chatting. She told me a little about her life—an educated family, the father dying when she was ten, a lot of unexpected poverty, not being able to go to college but determined to use every means to get into a position of money and power. When she mentioned meeting Bruno and Pat, I asked her about them again. She gave a low, husky little laugh.

"They're industrial spies. They have good jobs, but the reason they have so much money is they buy and sell technological secrets. They know people in every firm on one twenty-eight and they've done very well. But they can't keep it up forever. They're good. Real good. But then . . ."—she smiled impishly and kissed my nose—"who isn't?"

When I woke up, about noon, she was gone. I never saw her again.

Trouble in River City

GRACE KEEPS TELLING me I ought to be saying more about my sex life. She says I make myself sound like a monk. I said we didn't have to tell everything—that we hadn't said a word about our families or growing up. She said at thirty you have to stop kvetching about your childhood and get on with life. I told her I didn't think my sex life was all that interesting. She said that everybody's sex life is interesting to other people. I said I'd always thought sex was more interesting when it involved at least two people. She said if I couldn't come up with anything else I should tell about my fantasies. I said that having shrinks pick over your fantasies for a couple of years makes you reticent.

Going to shrinks was like being with my Uncle Walter the day after Christmas. Uncle Walter always gave me a really complicated game that was at least five years too old for me, and the day after

Christmas he and my father would teach me how to play. Within fifteen minutes they'd be completely wrapped up in competing with each other—whooping and yelling and making bets on every move. If I asked a question, they'd tell me to shut up and stop interrupting the game, and that since I was so far behind anyway why didn't I drop out and go play something else. When I protested that it was my game and I could play if I wanted, my father would call me a poor sport. Then I would cry and Uncle Walter would call me a baby and a sissy. Analysis was a lot like that only infinitely more subtle. But then it would be pretty hard not to be more subtle than Uncle Walter.

Grace said if the shrinks had made me reticent, how come I kept telling all these dreams? I said I had to because they were relevant to the story. She said not all of them. She said if I didn't say *something* she'd tell all she knew. So I want you to know I'm writing this under duress.

The fact is, before Maud came along I hadn't made love with anyone for a year and a half. I'm kind of a shy person and usually other people make the overtures, and if they don't nothing happens. A lot of women look at me as a sort of challenge, but challenges aren't so good for every day. Sometimes I wish I was more aggressive.

My relationships follow a pattern. Everything goes great at first and they tell me I'm not like other men—that I'm sensitive and playful and emotional and imaginative and stuff like that. But underneath it all I can tell they expect me to change. And after a few months they start looking at me funny, as if they were waiting. Like, "Well, that was a lot of fun, but when does the long haul start?" And I try to tell them that this *is* the long haul for me. I guess they think it's some kind of courtship routine I've developed and that once I feel secure about them I'll settle down and act normal. They say things like, "You know, you don't have to do this anymore. Can't you tell that I love you?" And when they tell me again I'm not like other men, the tone is a little different. They don't see why I have to be so emotional and oversensitive and bizarre and irresponsible. And why I take life too seriously sometimes and not seriously enough most of the time. They say they can't live this way and need more stability in their lives—someone steady and cold and dependable to

make them feel secure. At least that's the picture I get of what they want. So we cry a lot and break up, and they usually come back a few times when they're bored or lonely because they know I'm a pushover and can't hold a grudge.

The last time it was a little more intense than usual, and the reunions began to confuse and upset me. For the first time in my life I told someone to stop coming back, that I didn't want to sleep with her anymore. (It was also one of the few times I lied.) She was really crushed and went away for good, and I felt very guilty and started into a long decline that wound me up in the hospital.

So I'll have to admit that when I caught Maud looking at me over her barbecued chicken breast I felt pretty excited. Then she smiled and I knew what was on her mind and smiled back, and she just kind of moved right in. I felt a little uneasy about Jack because she was supposed to be with him and everything, but she let me know pretty early on that she didn't owe Jack anything. Jack looked like somebody who could take care of himself as far as women were concerned, and besides he didn't seem like that wonderful a person. I was just afraid it would bruise his ego and he'd have to get drunk and beat me up or something. But Maud insisted that she could handle it, and I sort of hung around with Grace and Bran until she did.

I'd like to tell you all that happened afterward, but I'm not very good at remembering details like that. I mean, I remember what the person looked like and felt like and whether it was a really wonderful time or just so-so, but when I try to remember who did what when, most of the time it's just a kind of warm, ecstatic blur with fleeting images of the person, like a movie montage. I can't fully recapture it and play it back, or even remember what all we did. I'm the same way about food. I can eat in the best restaurant in the world, and a month later I'd remember how good it was but I couldn't tell you what I ate. Grace says there's such a thing as living too much in the present, and that I'm a living example of it.

What I do remember about Maud was that she made everything feel like forbidden fruit. Like when you're little kids stealing candy, or staying up late and giggling, or playing doctor. Whether we were just talking together on the bench in the garden, sharing the same hamburger and exchanging stories and fantasies, or sneaking into my room and making love, it all had the same feeling of delicious mis-

chief—of being kids and taking your clothes off and going in a closet and feeling each other up. I mean, it got a lot more intense than that, but it was pure sex, without Sturm und Drang, as Grace would say.

I liked Maud. She had a playful spirit and an iron will inside that minkish body, but I like to think she never intended us any harm.

One reason the memory of Maud is blurred for me is that during the days following the barbecue I found out all about "Wyatt Earp," the most secret of the Duck Pond's five projects. Certainly there weren't any dinosaur eggs hatching in the other four. The clairvoyant-spying project still had too many bugs in it to be of any practical value, and the psychic communication project was also pretty well bogged down. The telehypnosis project was a complete fiasco and was being abandoned: Their best subjects could never hypnotize more than a few people at a time, and never members of the target population. The people most often affected were members of the Steinkopf staff, particularly the switchboard operator and the receptionist, both of whom went into trance at the slightest provocation, creating some embarrassing moments with visiting brass.

The "fire starting" project had also been dropped when it was discovered, first, that this particular psychokinetic gift was limited to adolescents between the ages of twelve and fifteen; second, that only the child's parents had the ability to provoke it; and third, that it only happened inside the home. These conditions severely restricted the applicability of the talent in a field situation. Conceivably a thirteen-year-old could be trained to infiltrate a guerrilla camp and secretly set fire to peasant huts psychokinetically, but they'd have a tough time maintaining cover with parents and a suburban American house in tow.

The more time I spent at the Duck Pond the more I suspected that these experiments were just window dressing—that the important project was Wyatt Earp. And the week after the barbecue I not only got inside the Wyatt Earp file but was able to sit in on a top-level briefing. This is what I was able to piece together from my efforts:

Wyatt Earp was started when the president decided to install offensive missiles on European soil and the Soviets reacted by beefing up their atomic submarine fleet. When this stage of escalation was complete the two nations found that the time between the launching

of a missile and its arrival at its target had been cut from thirty minutes to about seven. For most people around the world this increased fears of an accidental war touched off by radar confusion or computer error. But the Pentagon and the White House were more concerned about not responding "in time"—that is, to do to the enemy just as much as they would do to us. Conventional methods of communication, with all the fail-safe codes and procedures, might take longer than the incoming missiles. What they needed was something instantaneous that would bypass all the fail-safe mechanisms and launch the missiles the instant the president thought it was a good idea. This concern with speed was what led the project to be named "Wyatt Earp."

The key to Wyatt Earp was Iris, the code name of a gifted psychokinetic subject capable of rotating a sensitive set of three tumblers, balanced in a liquid solution in the fail-safe mechanism of every missile launching site around the globe. The tumblers, something like those in a slot machine and bearing similar pictures of fruit, were normally out of alignment but could be brought into trigger position whenever Iris visualized them this way.

Iris had been discovered in a Las Vegas alley, where he was lying, badly beaten, after having cleaned out a succession of slot machines in the same casino over a period of ten days. This talent having come to the attention of the management, he had been approached by several members of the club's Profit Margin Maintenance Department, who persuaded him to relinquish his winnings and promise in the future to be more impartial in the distribution of his patronage.

It turned out that Iris had a very circumscribed gift. He could line up slot machine symbols with amazing regularity, but when it came to the more conventional skills—turning dice, separating egg yolks, and the like—he was a bust. The Wyatt Earp scientists, working under a deadline, decided to make the best of what they had, and devised a whole launching system to fit Iris's peculiar talent. Since for some reason—a fondness for the fruit perhaps—he was most effective in making three cherries come up, the launch position was designed as the alignment of three cherry clusters. Under normal casino conditions Iris would have to be standing right next to the machine, but the launch tumblers were literally a million times more delicate. All Iris had to do was visualize three cherry clusters in that

vivid way he had, and all the fail-safe systems around the world were immediately bypassed and a launch instantaneously triggered.

This naturally created another problem for the Wyatt Earp scientists: how to keep Iris from visualizing cherries when no launch was desired. Luckily he turned out to be an excellent hypnotic subject, and with repeated posthypnotic suggestions they were able to inhibit his ability to visualize cherries. This inhibition could be overridden only by a verbal signal from the president himself, at which point the long-suppressed cherries would spring eagerly into Iris's consciousness.

A good deal of head scratching went into the choice of a verbal signal. Iris was to be within shouting range of the president at all times. For this purpose he was to pose as a Secret Service agent, accompanying the commander-in-chief wherever he went, with a permanent room in the White House where he was always on call. Since he was in such constant contact it was important to choose a signal that would never be uttered accidentally. This was a difficult problem, since the president was somewhat absentminded and rarely remembered anything he was told for more than an hour or so. A phrase had to be chosen that wouldn't be blurted out in the course of ordinary conversation but would nevertheless stick in his relatively frictionless memory. After compiling a long list and consulting with several members of the White House staff, the scientists came up with two phrases: "I love Lenin!" and "Abortion on Demand!"—both to be uttered with a certain volume and enthusiasm. In less than a week the president's training was complete, but every morning, to be on the safe side, he was tested by the National Security Adviser, who asked him to write the words on a piece of paper, which was immediately shredded.

A final problem that worried the Wyatt Earp scientists was how to keep Iris from accidently stumbling on a real cherry cluster lest this, too, override the posthypnotic inhibition. Word was put out that the president was allergic to cherries, and the job of one of the Secret Service advance men checking routes and buildings was to make sure the image never appeared on a billboard or neon sign. Slot machines were also taboo, and Iris was never allowed to watch television or movies that were not prescreened. All these precautions were probably unnecessary, since the one time security failed and Iris was

confronted with a bowl of cherries he merely commented on the "pretty red grapes." The incident never even made the list of nuclear "close calls," although one of the president's aides had a near-fatal heart attack when he saw the offending fruit, and was never able to eat them again without breaking out in hives.

There was naturally some concern about Iris's overall psychic well-being. He was watched very carefully and given a battery of psychological tests every two weeks. He was also strictly shielded from all mind-altering substances, since in addition to being a compulsive gambler he had a drinking problem.

At the time I found all this out, Iris was back for some final tests. A series of dummy "launches" was carried out successfully and the inhibitions imposed and overridden without any new problems arising. Because of the Pentagon's sense of urgency about the whole thing, the new tumbler devices had already been installed in most of the missile sites prior to final testing, and the system was now armed and ready to go. Iris was due back in Washington by the end of the week.

I "called" Louise to let her know and was surprised to discover, when Grace looked up the area code, that she was already close by, in Vermont. She told me to keep up my visits and work at trying to see the spider more clearly. Grace thought this sounded a little like a make-work project to keep me busy until Louise figured out what to do with us next, but when she voiced her suppositions Louise told her that seeing the spider could be the most important thing of all. She said she'd contact us as soon as she got to town, which would be in a few days.

I didn't have much luck with the spider. Several times I thought I'd seen it, but whenever I looked more closely it would dissolve into a spot or a fly or a crack in the wall. But by the third day I began to realize that my first impressions had been right all along, because when I'd go back later to inspect those cracks and spots they were never there. I began to feel irritated at the elusiveness of the spider. I knew when it was there—I could feel it. But I couldn't see it. I spent hours swirling suddenly in and out of rooms, trying to catch it off guard. But it was as if it knew I was looking for it and could always anticipate my every move.

One night I had a dream. Grace and I were sitting in a room filled

with many plants. Grace said, "What's that?" I saw a quick movement of leaves. Then a tiny, exquisite, lizardlike creature about the size of a small pen appeared. It was light pink, and perched on its fluffy, delicate tail, which made up three-fourths of its length, were two smaller animals about a half inch long, flat and trapezoidal like tropical fish—one an iridescent green, the other with yellow and black stripes. They looked like Tenniel's drawings of Looking-Glass Insects. We were awed and delighted by the beauty of the little creatures, and I woke up feeling happy and renewed, determined to protect them from a callous world.

I expected somehow that this dream would bring me success at Steinkopf, but it didn't. Seven days went by without any improvement in my ability to detect the spider, and Louise didn't appear. When I tried to "call" her, nothing happened. Another weekend came, and Grace went to the Cape to see Athene. I was getting a little anxious. Here I'd made this terrifying discovery about Iris and all, counting on Louise to know what to do about it, and Louise seemed to have vanished.

No Hiding Place Down There

ONE POSITIVE RESULT of the infamous Night of the Barbecue was that it shattered my larger-than-life image in Polly's eyes. She was completely disillusioned and told me so.

"I thought you were my friend. That's not what a friend does! I mean you knew I was into Jack and you just pushed me right out of the way! I think you're a rotten traitor and a big shit!"

With which she stormed into her room and slammed the door. I thought, "Life with Athene is going to be like this in another ten years." She continued to sulk around the house for hours until I couldn't take it anymore.

"Polly, don't be a brat. You had two men chasing you the whole evening and Jack wasn't one of them. If he *had* been I wouldn't have gone near him." (At least I would have talked to her first.) But she refused to answer me so I gave it up. For days she never said a word

to me beyond "pass the salt," right up until I left to spend my weekend with Athene. She also started going to a different dojo and began imitating my style of walking and talking in an aggressive way that made me want to flatten her. It was a good time to be gone.

The weekend also provided a welcome break from Bruno. He had started doing a whole romantic number—leaving notes, dropping over all the time to whisper nostalgic little innuendos in my ear, inviting me into his bed at all hours, and even sending me flowers once, which made me laugh. I think there was a kernel of caring there, but it was buried under so many layers of bullshit I wanted to say, "What's your angle, Jack?" the way they did in old gangster movies. He reminded me of those Latin men who look at you so soulfully and with such aching longing that you begin to wonder if they're in physical pain, when in fact it's nothing more serious than an erection and has exactly the same longevity. Taylor was embarrassed by it, Bran was unmerciful, and it certainly wasn't helping Polly over her sulk, so I finally had a talk with Bruno just before the weekend. I told him it had been wonderful, marvelous, and thrilling, but I thought we should leave it at that, particularly since we lived so close.

"Good fences make good neighbors, Jack," I suggested. "Let's just be neighbors."

He made a face. "I wish you weren't so sure of everything." He shrugged and smiled resignedly. "Apart from everything else, I really like you."

I felt a twinge of fondness and subjected it to a quickly administered crib death.

Early the next morning, which was Friday, I left for the Cape. I had decided it was now safe enough to use my car and I had finally pinned Athene's father down to a specific date. This was a major enterprise. Waite is entirely incapable of making a decision or an unreserved commitment to anything. He lives prisoner to the conviction that if he should ever get up and go after what he wants (on those rare occasions when he can figure out what it is) he'd run the risk of not being at home when his fairy godmother called to bestow on him some far superior goodie that he'd never even dreamed of. He hates ordering from menus for fear there's a special they're holding in reserve for the lucky person who hasn't asked for it. He

doesn't even like finding out what time it is. I'm sure he thinks there are some special minutes tucked away in a sealed cabinet somewhere: "The best of June 12th—to be held in reserve for Waite Gere, if he doesn't throw himself away on trash like 11:37 or 2:15."

When I first met Waite I found his unabashed helplessness refreshing after a series of macho types who always looked grim and stoical to varnish the fact that they were paralyzed with caution, phlegm, and ineptitude (but ready to belt the first woman who tried to give one of the constipated little buggers a leg up). Waite was exactly as advertised—a baby—and for some silly reason I thought that his being open about it would make it easier. It didn't. Supposedly therapy had improved him—he seemed all right with Athene—but I hadn't seen any signs of health slopping over onto our occasional encounters.

I'd been looking forward so long to seeing Athene that I woke up with the sun, and an hour later I was cruising down the Southeast Expressway in the Coupe (looking a little self-conscious in its new plates). I was more than ready to get away from Belmont and the household and Bruno and all our troubles. I could almost make myself believe that they didn't exist—being in my own car seemed like proof. I had reserved a tiny cabin for us in Wellfleet through Bran's friend at Harvard. He said the last weekend in July was the best time to be in Wellfleet because the lawyers were starting to go home, and the psychiatrists, who dominate August, hadn't arrived yet.

I was feeling so good that I was almost to the canal before I noticed there was a car following me. I pulled into the next gas station and went to the bathroom. The car pulled in, too; and when I left, it left. I pretended not to notice until I came to a traffic circle. Then I slowed down and very deliberately made a complete circuit. My pursuer was trying to stay a discreet distance behind, so that by speeding up sharply on the last quarter of the circle I was now following *him*—only a few car lengths in back. It took him another half circle to realize his predicament and extricate himself by pulling off onto one of the five roads leading away from the circle. He slowed down, and before getting out of visual range, pulled over and stopped, apparently realizing that since I already knew he was there he had nothing to lose by being obvious. I made another slow

circuit, trying to decide which of the several roads offered the best bet for losing him. When I had picked one I maintained my slow pace right up to the turnoff and then suddenly gunned it and peeled out. I had spotted a drive-in fast-food place about a quarter of a mile up the road and prayed that there wouldn't be a line.

They were just opening—one of those places where you give your order to a mike and then drive around to the back and pick it up. In this case the mike was embedded in a giant plastic clam with the head of a dachshund at one end and the tail of an Irish setter on the other. On the dog's head was a huge poke bonnet with an inscription on the rim: GRANDMA CLAMDOG—PLACE ORDERS HERE. The loudspeaker said, "Your order, please," as I drove up, but I just kept on going—I knew he couldn't be too far behind. When I'd made it around back, out of sight, I heard the loudspeaker shouting, "PLEASE BACK UP! YOU FORGOT TO GIVE GRANDMA YOUR ORDER!" over and over again. I was petrified that the goon in the car would hear it, but as I waited there, breathless, I heard his car go roaring by, making much too much noise for him to hear anything. I counted to thirty to make sure he'd be gone—one of the most difficult things I've ever done—and then drove out, headed back to the circle, found the road to Wellfleet, and took off like a rocket. I never saw another sign of the goon and after twenty miles or so I slowed down so I wouldn't get stopped by the cops.

Waite had comments about my "weird energy" when I picked Athene up—"weird" being malespeak for "a lot" when applied to a woman. And between shaking the goon and seeing Athene I was definitely feeling energetic. I was also anxious to get her out of there as quickly as possible—not just to get away from Waite but because I wouldn't really be able to relax completely until the car was off the road and out of sight.

The cottage was cozy and only three blocks from the beach. It had bushes that hid the car from the road and a fireplace for foggy nights. We spent a relaxed and silly weekend swimming, talking about her summer, exploring the dunes, and playing all the stupid board games in the closet. After she went to bed at night I'd sit up reading one of the *fin de siècle* novels one always finds in old summer cottages—full of virtuous heroines alienated from upright heroes whose sterling

character is revealed to the world in the last chapter. I began to feel like a normal person again.

Athene seemed a lot older to me—having to make decisions for Waite would age anyone—and I vowed never to let her go for a whole summer again. Her fine delicate limbs had lengthened and her curly hair (the only trait of value she'd acquired from Waite) was almost blonde from the summer sun. Lying on the beach Sunday afternoon, she looked at me steadily with her grave green eyes and asked: "Why are you in Belmont? Do you have a meeting?"

"Yes, I guess you'd call it that."

"Will you take me with you when you go back home?"

I hugged her.

"I certainly won't go without you, sweetie. I miss you too much already."

It was hard to say good-bye. We both cried a lot but I promised her that in three weeks we'd be together for good and heading for home. I wondered, as I spoke so confidently, whether the second part of the promise would ever be kept. But it's always ridiculous, these meaningless futures that parents hold out to children. Three weeks is eternity to a five-year-old.

The trip back Monday was uneventful and goonless. When I got home, Polly said hello in a reasonably friendly way and I started to cry, partly from relief at not having to defend myself with her and partly from missing Athene. Polly took it as a gesture of reconciliation and we made up. Then I learned she had two pieces of good news she was eager to tell me: first, that she'd landed a recording contract with a producer who'd heard her sing in Cambridge (this was, in fact, the beginning of her stardom); and second, that she'd had a big fight with Carl, the band leader, who had finally had to back down when the rest of the group supported her. I kissed her and congratulated her and told her quite truthfully that it was the best homecoming present she could have given me.

That was the good news. The bad I heard that evening when Bran came home. As soon as we were alone he told me that an FBI agent had come to the house Friday afternoon asking questions about Pat and Bruno. I asked Bran if he had let him in the house and he said he had.

"But he wasn't at all interested in us," he said. "Only in them. And

he claimed it was only a routine security check. But I'm quite familiar with those routine checks—they're usually perfunctory to the point of absurdity. You'd have to be carrying an enormous grudge to penetrate their disinclination to hear any bad news. But this fellow wasn't just *looking* for bad news, he was *hoping* for bad news. I told him I knew nothing. 'How subversive can you get at a barbecue?' I asked. He was not amused. He said he'd come back to talk with you tomorrow."

"Me? Why me?"

"He asked specifically if you and Taylor lived here."

"Why would he ask for us? The lease is in your name. What about Polly?"

"He didn't mention Polly, and I've said nothing at all to her. No point in her being frightened needlessly."

Taylor was at his new typesetting job and hadn't come back yet. At eight-thirty he called and asked if I'd meet him alone in the Square in a half hour. I decided to walk since it was still light out and I often walked that way to the dojo in the morning—past the brick wall with the ABORTION IS MERDER graffiti, past the courts where I could watch uncoordinated necrophiliacs stridently critiquing the ground strokes of women who were beating them at tennis. But by the time I finished reassuring Bran and got out of the house the light was almost gone, and after the Cape goon and Bran's report I was paranoid again. I began to hear footsteps and see shadows and feel as if I were being watched. The mind corrects for all that, of course, and although you feel tense and alert, it's partly a game: "Let's pretend we're in a movie and scare ourselves to death." When a real stimulus pops up, it's as much of a shock as if you were deep in a peaceful daydream.

I was passing some dense shrubbery in front of a house set way back from the street. It was completely dark by now and the street was a shady, overgrown one to begin with. I was almost positive I heard leaves rustle and a step behind me as I went by the driveway. I kept going, waiting for further data. It occurred to me that I might die because I didn't want to look stupid wheeling around to confront some harmless old man walking his dog. This truth was immediately confirmed as I heard a light, quick step behind me, felt a wiry arm

flung around my neck, and saw an odd-looking knife heading for my stomach.

There are several standard responses to this attack in aikido, and I didn't have to think at all. In a second I had grabbed the wrist and twisted it violently, dropping down in order to flip the assailant over my head. It all seemed so natural and familiar that it didn't occur to me for a moment to wonder why, instead of crashing awkwardly to the ground with a broken arm and sprained back, my attacker had done a graceful flip in the air and was now slapping the ground with his free hand as I took the knife away from him.

The ground-slapping was an aikido signal meaning "let go, please, the pain is excruciating." The knife proved to be a wooden one, the kind used in training. And my assailant was Tsubaki, dressed in white slacks, a silk shirt, and sandals. He grinned at me and nodded approvingly as I let go.

"Good rrrefrex!"

"Thank you," I said dryly. "You scared the shit out of me. I'm glad you like my technique."

"Almost," he said, thoughtfully. He made a linking gesture between us with his hand and shook his head. "Not frowing!" He pointed at me, said, "John Wayne! John Wayne!" and strutted about in an exaggerated cowboy walk. Then he strolled off into the driveway of what I now realized must be his house. "You come visit us!" he called out, and went to shut off his lawn sprinkler, which he'd apparently been about to do when he spotted me. As I stood there, still in shock, he waved and shouted again: "John Wayne! John Wayne!" This was his way of saying I hadn't achieved true aikido consciousness, in which there is no struggle with or resistance to your attacker but a complete acceptance of his energy and a willingness to join with it in restoring his psychic balance—thrown off kilter by his unfortunate impulse to attack you.

When I got to the café where I was supposed to meet Taylor he was standing outside, looking anxious.

"What is it?"

"In a minute. Let's take a walk."

I shrugged and fell in beside him. He headed for the subway entrance which was a block away.

"Don't talk too loud and don't look around."

My head twitched involuntarily as it always does when somebody tells me that.

"What's up?"

"There's a guy following us. We're going into the subway."

"C'mon, Taylor, not the old jump-in-and-out-of-the-subway-car number! You've been seeing too many movies."

"No. I'll show you. I don't want to talk about it here."

I told him quickly about the goon in the car and asked him about the FBI man, but he had nothing to add. By this time we were down in the subway. We crossed the length of the platform and took an escalator up to another level. It was an odd route to follow, but Taylor made it more convincing by looking around distractedly as if he were uncertain where he was going. On the way up the escalator we looked back and could see the man: a WASP type in a seersucker suit. There weren't many people in the station so he was fairly conspicuous.

As he crossed to the escalator he was intercepted by an old bag lady. Wearing a brown kerchief and hunched over almost at right angles, she dropped her bags and grabbed him by the sleeve. He tried to shrug her off, irritably, but she held on and standing on her tiptoes whispered something in his ear. He stopped and looked at her and they stared in each other's eyes for what seemed like a full minute. We were at the upper level now, watching over the railing. The man looked as if he were in a daze. He seemed to have forgotten all about us and wandered over to the edge of the platform. The bag lady drifted off.

Suddenly the man pulled a gun, wheeled around, and assumed a firing stance—gun in both hands. A couple of people saw him and screamed, and the lower level promptly emptied out altogether. The man wheeled around again, looked down the subway tunnel, and shouted something. Then he fired. He jumped and looked up the tunnel in the other direction, right under us, shouted, and fired again. Finally he directed a whole volley of shots at the wall opposite him across the tracks, then slumped and pitched forward onto the rails. Everyone ran down to see because they could hear a train coming, but he was already dead, killed by his own ricocheting bullets.

Taylor and I stayed where we were until the gradually swelling

crowd carried us down to the lower level where the incoming train was being flagged to a halt. As we got to the bottom I saw the bag lady sitting on a bench, hunched over her parcels. Taylor, with uncharacteristic determination, dragged me over to her. When we got there, she lifted her head and uttered a familiar cackle. It was, of course, Louise.

A Pep Talk

"HOLY SHIT!" GRACE said. "I should have known."

Then she quieted down so we could hustle Louise and ourselves out of the subway as unobtrusively as possible before the police came. When we got to a dark spot, Louise handed Grace her bags, stripped off her kerchief, and straightened up, so that by the time we got to the street the bag lady no longer existed. Grace slipped the bags into a trash receptacle and we emerged into the Cambridge night as three perfectly ordinary people, at least by Cambridge standards.

Louise looked around with interest. "Deadmen country," she said judiciously, popping several sticks of gum in her mouth. "Hard to breathe here."

"What did you *say* to him?" Grace wanted to know.

Louise laughed. "I told him there were commies in the subway."

"That's all?"

"Well, I did a little Injun sign on him. Big medicine back where I come from." She chuckled. "First time I ever did it in a subway."

I shuddered a little. "That was . . . scary, Louise."

She looked at me quietly, chewing her plastic cud. "We're not playin' for Tootsie Rolls, partner."

I was still upset. "Too many people are dying because of us."

"They were dead to begin with," Grace said grimly. She was just covering up, but it irked me.

"You don't know that! Maybe they're pretty dead on the outside, but they might have a little corner of life somewhere. Some little part of them that thinks: 'Hey! This isn't right! This isn't the way life is supposed to be!' Maybe they just don't know what to do . . . how to get out of it, make it different. Maybe if someone would show them how . . . or give them permission even! Maybe they're just beginning to figure it out! Maybe they've just begun to think, 'Hey! I don't have to be a part of this!' Maybe they were just about to be *born! You* don't know!"

"Look, Taylor, if somebody's alive it's their duty to let other people know about it. If you don't show any signs of life you can't complain when they bury you."

Louise was silent during all this. We were walking toward her pickup, which was parked a half mile away. Now she put her hand on my shoulder and stopped me.

"You think I drove white-eyes crazy?"

"Didn't you?"

She grunted. "Takes two to tango."

I thought about this all the way home. Louise dropped us off a block from the house after driving by to see where it was. She said she'd call and that we shouldn't have any trouble for a while unless we went looking for it. Then she drove off. Grace slipped her arm around my neck and kind of gave me a squeeze and I did the same and we walked the last little bit that way. She knew I was still bothered and I knew she was, too. Trying to figure out what Louise had said. Knowing she never said all there was. Trying to fill in

missing pieces. Not getting anywhere. Finally I gave it up, as Grace laughed a low, quiet, throaty laugh—the kind people do when they're sitting on screened-in porches on summer evenings.

"Did you ever think, Taylor, in your wildest dreams, that we'd ever be in a place like this? With shit like this happening? Acting like it's normal everyday life? You and me?"

"No. I'm glad it's you, though."

"I'm glad it's you, too. Of course, if it was anybody else I wouldn't be here."

We laughed, both thinking the same thought, which was imagining what Peter would be like in a situation like this. I think it was the first time we realized that there was some subtle way we worked together that we could count on and had come to rely on. We gave each other a really long hug when we said good night.

Next morning at breakfast there was a knock on the door and Louise's friend Collie appeared, dressed exactly as we had last seen her in Denver. She ducked through the doorway, waved to us in silent greeting, and strode to the phone. Picking up the receiver, she unscrewed it and took out what was obviously a bug. She pocketed this and then ambled through the other rooms. Polly and Bran looked at us questioningly, and Grace told them not to worry about it.

"She's on our side," I said.

"Who's on the other side?" Polly said nervously. "I thought we were through with all that stuff. I thought we were safe here. Are people following us again? Come on! Don't shit me!"

"It's us. Nobody's looking for you."

But Collie finding the bug brought us down. Every time we'd thought it was over it turned out it wasn't. Grace and I ate the rest of the meal in silence while Bran told Polly about the FBI man in as reassuring a way as possible.

A half hour later Collie came downstairs, having completed her search. She held out her fist and unrolled it, revealing a half dozen crushed metallic objects.

"Mostly in the back," she said, pointing to my room.

"How'd they *get* there?" Polly wanted to know.

"How long you been here?"

"What is it now, five weeks?"

Collie shrugged. "Could've been here before you came," she suggested, dropping the mangled bugs into the pocket of her blue workshirt and sliding her fingers into the front pockets of her jeans. "She's waiting for you," she said to me.

Grace was up like a shot. "I'm coming, too."

Collie nodded. "I got room."

"Why don't we all go," Bran suggested. "I don't have anything pressing. . . ."

Collie shook her head slowly, not even agitating her long black and gray-streaked ponytail. "No room." It was so conclusive that Bran was daunted. We left him and Polly still sitting at the breakfast table, looking perturbed. It was a mistake, although I don't know how we could have avoided it. By the time we got back they were in full rebellion, determined to find out what was going on. With Louise's permission we told them as little as we could get away with and a lot less than we knew, which, after all, wasn't very much. About the Duck Pond I told them nothing at all. Devon had never been mentioned in their company since the day after we left Denver, when I had passed it off as a joke.

Louise was at the Fresh Pond Reservoir, sitting on a bench with Barghest. Collie left us there and drove off. Barghest greeted us with a cordial tongue, much to Grace's disgust.

What Louise wanted to see me about was the spider. I had told her I wasn't getting anywhere.

"You're tryin' too hard."

"How can I try less hard?"

"If you're there, you won't have to try."

I stared at her stupidly.

"You can't see what's there. You're decidin' 'fore you go what you want to see. So you can't see what's there."

"John Wayne," Grace said, suddenly.

"What?"

"Never mind."

"Go ahead, Captain."

"You're struggling with him. Using *your* energy instead of his. You're trying to fight him. To compete."

Louise nodded. "Listen to the Captain."

I was confused. "Of course I'm struggling! I want to see him and he doesn't want me to!"

"Why do you want to see him?"

"Because you told me to."

"If that was it, you'd've seen him by now."

"Who is he anyway?"

"If I told you, you wouldn't need to see him."

"Is he working for you?" Grace asked abruptly.

Louise laughed gleefully. "Am I working for *him,* that's the question!"

"Last time, with the Gormanizers," Grace persisted, "you had a bunch of other people out there doing just what we were doing. Is that true here?"

Louise shook her head. "That was mechanics. We had to surround 'em so somebody'd be close enough. Had to make sure."

"I thought maybe you were doing the same thing at Steinkopf. In case I blew it."

Louise grinned and nodded in comprehension.

"If you'd give us more information we wouldn't make these mistakes," Grace couldn't resist adding.

"That's right," Louise agreed, chuckling with the special delight she seemed to take in Grace's assertiveness. "You'd make different ones." Then she turned serious. "Deadmen—"

"Is the spider a deadman?"

Louise paused. "I sure hope so."

"Why?"

"Deadmen try to get converts. You compete with 'em, you start to die, too. But if you don't play their game you always win, 'cause you're alive. You don't *have* to fight 'em. Just be alive. Beats bein' dead."

"What if they kill you?" Grace asked skeptically.

"Then you'll be livin' somewhere else. Least you're not walkin' around dead. Deadmen—they're not anywhere."

"But they're not all completely dead," I objected. "It's not all or nothing."

"You want to play doctor? Go ahead. Just don't fight with 'em."

She asked about my dreams, and I remembered the one about the bright-colored little creatures.

"See? Just think about them little lizards. They'll help you."

Then she tossed away her gum and refused to talk about it anymore.

A Picnic Without Ants

TUESDAY NIGHT BRUNO came over and asked if I wanted to go canoeing the next day. I started to remind him about fences and neighbors.

"Relax, Grace," he protested. "I'm inviting the whole household. A picnic. We rent canoes at this place, they drive you up river a few miles and it takes four hours of easy paddling to get back. You stop and have a swim and a picnic about halfway, and another one at the end. Makes a nice day. Maud and Ginger were going to call in sick at work, but they chickened out. In fact the whole thing was Maud's idea. It's pretty on the river and nobody'll be there on a weekday. And I've already paid for the goddamn canoes. What about it?"

"Can we all fit in two canoes?"

"Sure! Three and three. Two paddlers and one tourist."

It sounded good to me, and Polly and Bran were enthusiastic. They seemed to be on the upswing again, and we were all nature-

starved with all this city living. But Taylor was determined to stay home and try to crack the spider case.

Pat didn't go, either—at the last minute he was called in to work. I was having a hard time with all these coincidences: four people in four different companies taking the day off and then three of them reneging. It gave me a queasy feeling and I never would have gone if Polly and Bran hadn't been there, too.

I had another taste of uneasiness when the canoe man was driving us to the take-off point. Bran was in high spirits, asking all kinds of questions.

"If you followed this river upstream as far as you could paddle, where would you come out?"

"The Duck Pond," Bruno said abstractedly, staring out the window.

"Duck pond? There's no duck pond up there," the canoe man said. "Ducks are all downstream, in the marshes."

"Just a figure of speech," Bruno said. He seemed nervous and preoccupied.

"What town would it be?" I asked the canoe man casually. "The last paddling place?"

"Pretty much peters out time you get up to Devon. Two little creeks come together there just below that old monastery "

According to Taylor only people who actually worked at Steinkopf called it the "Duck Pond." How did Bruno know about it? And why did he mention it? Either he assumed I'd never heard the expression or else it was deliberate—a way of letting me know he knew about us.

But all these worries receded once we got on the river. It was only about twenty-five feet wide and rarely more than two feet deep—running through thick woods over sandy, pebbly soil. Parts of it were shady under overhanging trees, and the only sounds were birds and insects. I began to let go a little.

Bruno and I took one canoe and Polly and Bran the other. We talked very little—only to point out an animal or bird—and I was startled to realize, when we rounded a bend and sighted the spot Bruno had picked for lunch, that two hours had gone by. We hadn't seen another canoe the entire time.

The river had widened by now and opposite the clearing where we landed was a hole deep enough for swimming. Evergreens had made a carpet of pine needles on the ground, and hanging from a tall tree was a rope that someone had put up for swinging out over the river. It was hot and the water was irresistible. As soon as we had pulled up the canoes and unloaded the food, I stripped and dove in, remembering only as I surfaced and saw the other three standing a little awkwardly on the bank that they might feel less comfortable being nude. But Polly started to peel off her clothes and the men gradually followed. Bran was the first to try the rope, taking it far up the slope until it was almost horizontal and then jumping. He swung out in a wide arc and let go just when he reached the center of the stream, twisting and dropping with a whoop and a tremendous splash. It was done with the unconsidered enthusiasm of a twelve-year-old, but there was a comic, self-mocking, insouciant grace that was uniquely Brandonic. It was a memorable performance, and I could tell from Polly's shriek of delight that she thought so, too.

I raced Polly for the rope, beating her by inches. But she looked so charming with her elf face and skinny arms and little nipples erect from the cold water—hazel eyes dancing and thin little lips begging—that I didn't have the heart to make her wait. She spun out and let go, arms and legs pedaling wildly like a falling puppy in a cartoon.

Bruno went after me. His moodiness had taken a sullen turn the moment we took our clothes off, and he seemed both reluctant to join in and unwilling to make himself look bad by refusing. He handled it in typical necrophiliac fashion: by taking the rope slightly higher than Bran had done, going out a little farther before letting go, and executing an almost perfect jackknife into the water.

I think he lost Polly right there—not that he cared. She had been giving her eyes a lot of exercise since he'd taken his clothes off, but when he surfaced after the dive there were only four hands clapping (mine a little sarcastically but those subtleties don't always translate). I was beginning to realize how allergic she was to arrogance or pretentiousness in men—a recurrent obstacle in her relationship with Bran. Bruno had kept his ego pretty well under wraps until now.

Bruno was the first out of the water and the first dressed and seemed to lighten up a little once he got to his pack and started getting the food out. But he was still unusually quiet and tense. With the gift of hindsight I'd say he acted like a man about to be fired.

Bran, on the other hand, was at his most entertaining. During lunch (cold barbecued chicken, stuffed mushrooms, Brie, French bread, peaches, grapes, and quite a lot of white wine for four people) he recounted tales from academe—something he was particularly good at—and after we'd finished eating he pulled out his mandolin and suggested we all sing to help digestion.

"It sends a message, you see, to all the little enzymes to get to work. A kind of Muzak for the digesting masses. I like to think of them as miners, with little caps and all, burrowing away for the fatherland—happy and patriotic for the most part but subject to periodic rebellions when working conditions become too onerous. 'Not bloody cabbage, again!' and things like that. Then they have walkouts and work stoppages, you see, and you get indigestion and heartburn and so on, and you don't even know why. The brain is your typical top management, you see—so detached from what's going on at the firing line, it hasn't got a clue as to why there's any discontent. The brain says, 'What's the matter with these fellows, slacking off on the job again! Absenteeism, slowdowns, long coffee breaks—it's just one thing after another! And we pay them top dollar, too. Way I look at it, the better you treat them, the worse they get. Look at those Third World enzymes, they'll digest anything! Don't see *them* going on strike! Give 'em bloody rice and beans and they're bloody glad to have it! Well, it's no time to get soft: Send down some antacid—that'll make the little beggars shape up!'"

"What *should* he do, then?" Polly asked. "I mean, if he's like enlightened management or something?"

"Well, the first thing to do when you've given your workers a really impossible task is to get out of the way. In the digestion industry we call that the 'executive nap.' It's only just beginning to catch on in other industries. Perhaps you've noticed: When management has bungled things virtually beyond repair they always call in the workers and say, 'Look here, you chaps have always wanted a go at running things. Now's your chance. We're going to sell you the

whole operation at a very fair price and you can do with it whatever you like.' When you're making a hash of it, best thing to do is bugger off. Someone'll fix it and you'll get the credit. I mean, after all, every organization I know is too centralized anyway, and the human brain is no exception. The only time it ever achieves anything worthwhile is when the CEO is on vacation."

"Okay, okay!" Polly broke in, waving her arms in the excitement of chasing a thought that was on its way to a rabbit hole. "Say it is . . . I mean, I'm not disagreeing or anything, but suppose you're right: Everything on earth is over-like-centralized." She paused, groping. "How does it happen? How did everything get fucked up all at once?"

Bran didn't even pause for breath. "Monotheism!" he pronounced, waving his wineglass. "Monotheism! Some twit went around convincing people there was only one God, you see, and they all went for it! It had a certain simpleminded appeal, of course, because before that there were hundreds of gods. There were gods in everything—every bush, every flower, every animal, every stone, every mountain—all with different names! It was a great mental strain remembering all these gods, and after a while people became stupid. They couldn't remember all these gods, you see, and so they were extremely susceptible when this fellow went around talking all that one-god rot. To make it all the easier for him, they'd had some bad luck with a volcano lately, and when he said the god responsible for *that* was the top banana they went for it. Reasoning, you see, that even if he wasn't the *only* god he was the one they ought to pay the most attention to. And so this idea that there was only one god—and you had to kiss his ass all the time or he'd be cross—spread like wildfire! Because people are basically lazy, stupid buggers and if you give them an easy way out they'll take it. So they said, 'Good! Let's set up our communities the same way! With one chap at the top who'll tell everybody what to do, and then we won't have to think anymore. And we'll give him a lot of robes and things to make it more convincing, and we'll bow down every day and give him lots of wives, and I think it'll fly.' And it did. And so people started having kings and bosses, and nobody's had to think for themselves ever since."

"Bravo," I said. "I'm basically a pagan myself. Taylor is, too. He

sees gods in everything. I think monotheists have a depressing lack of imagination."

I looked over to see how Bruno was taking this. He seemed pretty conventional about most things—your run-of-the-mill double-thinking hypocrite who espouses poverty and pacifism on Christmas Eve and worships greed and war the other 364 days of the year. But he seemed indifferent to everything except the fact that Bran was occupying center stage.

Meanwhile Bran was trying his best to relinquish it by asking people to suggest songs we could all sing together. But it was one of those times when memories are out of sync—each suggestion finds only one taker, who only knows a line or two. Finally Polly rescued us from the struggle by telling Bran to play something for us.

By this time Bran had drunk quite a bit of wine and his maternal accent was showing again. I was pleased—not just because I enjoyed it but because it meant Polly was opening that part of him that Helen's death had sealed off. However inappropriate Polly might be as a long-term lover, if she could succeed in that she had my vote.

Bran now launched into a Russian folksong—delivered with tears, laughter, lamentation, and wild dancing in full measure and spilling over the brim. Polly demanded another and still another. Even Bruno began to come out of his sulk, watching this bizarre courtship take place. We exchanged smiles. Bran was in another world and Polly looked like one of her own pubescent fans. When he paused for breath and wine, Polly asked him what his mother's maiden name was. He leaned back on the pine needles with his fist to his head and smiled.

"Dashowsky. Elena Dashowsky. When she married my father she insisted on keeping her own name, so I was born Brandon Vladimir Smithfield Valdemar-Dashowsky. And always in school they made fun of my name, so when I went to Oxford I dropped the 'Dashowsky.' My mother was already dead—she died when I was twelve—but I felt very guilty. I had betrayed her memory just to 'fit in.' And, of course, when I came to America, a Russian name was not popular, so I left it off."

"Your father was English?"

"No! My father was Russian, too!" he said, laughing. "That is the big joke! My family have lived in England for three generations, but

they are all Russian! When my great-grandfather comes to England and they ask him his name he says 'Vladimir.' They misunderstand, and think this is his last name. So, being English, they introduce him in this way: "I say, Bert, this is our new neighbor, Mr. Vladimir.' But, of course, they have trouble saying it, and it becomes 'Valdimir' by the time it gets across the room. And the mayor's wife—always looking out for any opportunity to upgrade the social class of this little suburban town—notices that he has an accent, and she says, 'Ah, Valdemar! That's French, isn't it?' and begins to flirt a little, because the English middle class think all the French are very promiscuous and very erotic. So my great-grandfather thinks to himself, 'Aha! I have a good thing going here!' In those days, you see, every Russian aristocrat, no matter how poor and stupid, spoke French, and my great-grandfather is very quick-witted. So he says, 'Yes of course! How clever of you to see it! It's from *"vallée de la mer,"* which means "valley of the sea"—my ancestors' estate is a little valley on the ocean, surrounded by hills.' And he described so often this beautiful estate, that I think he began to believe in it himself. So that is how I became a Valdemar."

"And your mother?"

"Ahhh!" he sighed. "She was a ballerina. The men in my family do not like English women. They all find Russian wives and refuse to be assimilated. They live in a little cosmopolitan community in London. I am the only traitor. My father went to the Russian ballet and fell in love with a ballerina. She gave up her career to be a mother, but she was never happy with this choice."

Bran looked so sad that Polly put her hand on his knee to comfort him.

"So did they call you Vladimir after your great-grandfather?"

"Yes. My mother never called me Brandon. She always called me 'Vlodya.' That's a nickname for Vladimir. She could hardly speak English."

"Vlodya."

"Yes. Vlodya."

"Can I . . . call you that?"

Bran, who was staring unhappily into space, turned slowly to look at her, drinking in the warmth of her appeal. "I would be very happy. But just you, little gypsy, just you. To the rest of the world I am

Brandon. For you I will be Vlodya."

"Will you sing me another song? Vlodya?"

"With great pleasure."

He launched into a passionate rendering of "The Little Green Willow," and when he was through Polly insisted that he teach her the words, which he did, translating as he went. Eventually we were all singing it—it's the perfect sentimental song to sing after a lot of wine—but it was fundamentally a duet. In the chorus Bran sang harmony, and Polly twined her powerful voice around his with a contained softness that was so erotic it made me break out in an explosion of gooseflesh.

"You have to sing with me next time I perform," Polly demanded.

Bran started to demur but we jumped on him until he agreed. "But I don't want anything to nip in the bud your career! Especially me!"

It was getting late and we had another two hours to go, but before tackling the river again we decided we needed another dip. Our excuse was that we were hot and sleepy from all the wine and sun and food, but what we really wanted was another shot at the rope. We might have been there yet if Bran hadn't finally pushed the game too far. Miscalculating the distance, he let go too soon, when he was over shallow water. We saw him hit bottom, landing feet first and falling over sideways in water that was scarcely up to his knee. When he came up his face was white with pain and he was having trouble steadying himself. We helped him onto the bank, where he proved to have a pulled muscle in his left calf and a broken big toe, the main source of pain. He could paddle on one side with passable comfort by folding his leg under him, but Polly had to take the stern paddle, which slowed us down some since she was rather erratic in her steering.

The second half of the trip, to quote Polly, sucked. We wanted to get Bran to a doctor before his foot got too swollen, but there was no way to short-cut the river trip—no roads with passing cars, no houses with phones. The river wound through a wildlife park, Bruno told us, with no sign of civilization until just before the canoe place.

To add to our discomfort the river now emerged from the woods

and began to meander endlessly through a huge marsh, where there was nothing to be seen but reeds and grass and the odd muskrat. And mosquitoes by the million, for which we were entirely unprepared. And of course the river was a lot slower here, now that we were anxious to make time. Once we paddled for fifteen minutes only to look through a gap in the reeds and recognize the spot where we'd started the loop, less than five yards away. We could have carried the canoes across and cut out the entire bend. It probably took us an hour to travel a distance that was no more than two hundred yards as the crow flies. But we couldn't see, and Bran couldn't walk, and we didn't know how long the marsh would last or how convoluted the river's meandering really was.

But somebody else did, for as we rounded what seemed like the hundredth bend to confront the next little stretch of monotonous swamp, we saw a long gray flat-bottomed boat in the middle of the river with two men, fishing. They were all in blue: blue jeans, blue short-sleeved shirts, and blue corduroy turned-down hats. They looked up, smiling, as we approached. Since there was so little room to pass, we had to separate the canoes in order not to disturb their fishing. Having in mind Polly's uncertain control, Bruno and I slowed down and veered off to the right, leaving the wider gap at the left for her canoe. I was in the bow as we started to pass the stern of the rowboat, so I couldn't see Bruno, but I was aware simultaneously that he had stopped paddling and that the taller of the fishermen had put down his rod and was about to start up the outboard motor.

"Don't bother," I said. "We can get around."

"I know you *can* get around," the short one said quietly. "But you *may* not."

By this time Polly and Bran, taking advantage of a rare opportunity to grab the lead, had sped through the gap and were already disappearing around the next bend, entirely oblivious to what was happening.

I turned around to look at Bruno. He had pulled his pack toward him and was hurriedly unzipping it.

"Take it easy, Jack," the tall one said, his hand on the starting rope. "You can make things easier by just coming with us, and letting all

these nice people go ahead and have their canoe trip. It's got nothing to do with them, after all." Then he started the engine.

The short one now sported a large nasty-looking gun, which he was keeping carefully aimed at Bruno. The engine, I finally understood, was intended not for locomotion but to cover the sound of shots, should they become necessary. Bruno was rummaging desperately in his daypack, and the short man smiled as he clasped both hands together around the gun.

"Go ahead, Jack," he said, obviously enjoying the role, "make my day!"

The next instant his face disintegrated and he pitched forward into the muddy water, the gun dropping from his hand. The tall one, who had been adjusting the valve on the motor, quickly pulled his own gun, but the boat was rocking so violently he lost his balance and the shot went wild.

Bruno, who while pretending to search for his gun had actually been aiming it—firing through his pack—now shot at the tall man but missed him. He fired again before the man could recover his balance and this time succeeded. The man slumped, knocking the motor into gear, and the boat started to put-put sedately up the river with its dying helmsman hunched grotesquely over the motor. As the boat disappeared around the bend I started to paddle furiously and Bruno quickly joined in. His instinct was no doubt to leave the scene of the crime. Mine was to overtake Polly and Bran before Bruno had a chance to realize that I was his only witness and this might be his last chance to take advantage of the fact. It took two bends before we caught up to the others (who hadn't even noticed our absence), and all the way there I kept feeling a hole opening up in the back of my head. I cursed myself for letting Bruno take the stern paddle.

"Mind telling me what that was all about?" I asked, wanting to keep him occupied.

"Company goons," he said grimly, "from Maud's firm."

"How do you know that?"

"No one else knew we were here."

"What about Pat? Or Ginger?"

He laughed. "Forget it."

"You think Maud would try to have you killed? What for?"

"It's a cutthroat business. You'd be surprised what goes on."

"You haven't told me why."

"Let's say I found out a few things about her business that will save my company about seventy-five million dollars in the next few years and Maud's folks would like very much to know how I did it, so it won't ever happen again."

"They'd kill you for that? I suppose for that kind of money people do, don't they."

"They'd much rather get the information, of course."

"And you're willing to kill them so they don't. Do they pay you that well?"

"I wouldn't kill for money. Only to save my neck."

"Couldn't you have just told them?"

"Then I'd have *my* people out to kill me. Right now they're behind me. They'll take care of me. Once you've changed sides you're worthless. Nobody trusts you and nobody wants to keep you alive."

"Those are nasty bullets you've got there."

"Yeah." He was silent a moment. "Look, Grace, where do you stand in this? You know I did it in self-defense."

"I'll testify for you if it comes to that."

"What if I make sure it doesn't come to that?"

"Does 'making sure' mean killing someone else?"

"It means making myself extremely inconspicuous, as your English friend would say."

I thought a minute.

"If you've told me the truth—"

"I'm talking one day, that's all. After that I don't care."

"So you want me not to tell the others?"

"Just till tomorrow."

There were two possibilities: Either he wanted to get away or he wanted to kill me before I said anything. All I had to do was make sure there were always other people around when he was. So I agreed.

The first step was to get in sight of the others, and as soon as we caught up I made sure we got in front of them and stayed there. Bruno showed no signs of trying to slow the pace and it was prob-

ably silly of me, but I felt much better. Bran and Polly had a lot to say about my eagerness to get in front again and how pushy and competitive I was, but it was worth it.

The river now entered another wood, straightened out, and quickened. It was quite a pretty stretch in fact, but no one was able to enjoy it. Bran was in acute pain, trying hard not to spoil what he imagined was everyone else's fun. By the time we got him out of the canoe and into the car he was quite ready to let Polly mother him—a new role for her, but she threw herself into it like a pro. Bran's foot was very swollen now and his calf stiff and painful.

"But at least," he said, wincing as he settled into the backseat with his foot on Polly's lap, "we didn't have any ants."

A Spider Unveiled

ABOUT AN HOUR after Grace and the others left for the picnic, as I was getting ready for my morning trip to the Duck Pond, I heard a huge van pull into the driveway next door. I thought they were probably delivering an appliance of some kind and put it out of my mind.

I had a lot of concentrating to do and I felt nervous. I didn't know why it was important to Louise that I see the spider, but I figured it must be part of her program for counteracting the dangers of Wyatt Earp. I tried to remember what she had said about just being alive, but how could I relax when people were following me and putting bugs in my room? When the only thing standing between us and nuclear annihilation was the temporary inability of an ex-alcoholic to visualize cherry clusters?

As soon as I was out of my body I went straight to the Wyatt Earp room at Devon, where I found them frantically seeking ways to find

and recruit psychokinetic subjects as talented as Iris—thinking ahead to the day when he might drop dead of a coronary. I thought I caught a glimpse of a spider in the corner by the ceiling, but he disappeared instantly. I was pretty sure he was in the room somewhere but I couldn't track him. It was the same old frustrated feeling—and after vainly whizzing around the room for a while I found myself back in my body.

I got up, stomped around my room, and swore a lot. Then I had a glass of water and lay down again. I considered what Louise had said about using the lizard. Use it how? Think about it? Visualize it? I closed my eyes and pictured the lizard with the two other little creatures on its tail. It was hard at first; I couldn't get their colors very well, or the fluffy, iridescent, translucent texture. But the effort brought back some of the wonder and delight I'd felt in the dream. I was so in love with their *presence*—the absurd, unselfconscious confidence of very small things in their right to exist, to be exactly what they are in defiance of the whole predaceous world. The more I recaptured this feeling, the more clearly I could see them, and vice versa.

When they were as vivid as in the dream, I put out my hand and pictured them running onto it. Then I went back to Steinkopf. But when I started peering around for the spider, the lizard and its friends disappeared. I stopped looking, concentrated on the creatures, and they came back. Then I looked again for the spider and they disappeared again, and so on, again and again. I was crazy with impatience—ready to give up and go home and smash something—when it finally dawned on me that I was never going to pin down the spider by searching, and that, as absurd as it sounded, I had better follow Louise's advice and just concentrate on these little fantasy beings that seemed so glad for the chance just to exist.

So I perched on top of a file cabinet and looked at them sitting in the palm of my hand. The lizard whipped its fluffy tail back and forth a few times, giving the other two all they could do to hang on. Then it turned and ran down my arm to the cabinet and onto the wall. The two other creatures let go and hovered like butterflies for a moment, then ran after the lizard, and the three of them scampered in circles all over the wall, single file. It was some time before I became aware that they had stopped roaming randomly about, and were making

circles around a single spot. The circles became narrower and narrower, and the creatures finally stopped moving altogether. And in the middle of their tiny circle, surrounded, was the spider.

I looked at it, stared at it. It started to fade. I looked at the other creatures, and it came back. To look closely at the spider I had to give the other creatures equal attention and never lose consciousness of my affection for them. When I could finally do this, the spider was clear and still, as if immobilized, entrapped.

The spider was black and glistening, and I realized it, too, was quite beautiful in its own way. As I watched, it began to turn this way and that, stretching and preening, as if in response to my admiration.

I didn't know what to do next. I could see the spider; I had "caught" it in a way. Should I go back now? Or should I *do* something with it? And, if so, what? I couldn't just sit here on the file cabinet forever (at the thought I began to float around the room). I was aware that there were people below me, all oblivious to the little drama on the wall, mechanically going through the motions of being scientists.

I looked at the little creatures for guidance. They seemed to be settled in for the winter, but they didn't look at all tense about it: They just sat there glowing happily and fluttering slightly in the nonexistent breeze. I relaxed. If they could, I could.

I drifted into a kind of Zen-like state. The four creatures blended into a single entity and then separated again. I was in a deep trance. So deep that the spider seemed to be changing. Growing. Bigger and bigger and brighter and brighter. The lizard and its friends could no longer contain it. They flew back to me and settled down on my arm. The spider was now enormous, filling half the room. I could see colors in its glistening black surface. It opened its jaws and extended its legs toward me. I had a brief moment of panic, but the lizard fluttered its pink tail and soothed me. The spider was trying to shape itself into a symbol that would repel and frighten me, but I was too dazzled by the masses of furry avocado greens and iridescent purples that shimmered under the black surface of its body.

The spider froze—jaws open wide and legs extended, with a clear sticky substance trailing between. I reached out and touched the substance. It clung to me. Or did I cling to it? Then a small crack

appeared on the spider's body—a white crack—the white of the wall behind. It widened. Then there was another, and another. The spider's body was splintered with white. And then it was gone, leaving only the bit of sticky substance on my hand—the beginning of a long strand of webbing that led out the window and over the countryside toward the sea. I turned to follow it, and the three creatures fluttered up to my face and dissolved.

The strand of webbing led north-northeast. Soon I was over the ocean and could see clearly the entire coastline from Boston to Bar Harbor. I swept over the water, following the strand until I saw Portland to the east and a lighthouse on an isolated rock to the north. Halfway between them the strand disappeared into one of two towers at the end of an island. I followed it quickly, swooping down into an opening in the top story of the tower, which was apparently some sort of lookout. The opening gave a 360° view of the bay and must have provided a fine nesting place for gulls (the floor was covered with several inches of guano). But I had no time to look around; the strand had disappeared down the stairway and I was racing after it. The transition from bright blue to utter darkness was dramatic, and very familiar. I swirled down the stairs and into a long corridor that led to another and another and another, each smaller than the last. I had a moment of confusion as to whether I was awake or asleep, because I seemed to be back in one of my alchemist dreams. The last corridor ended in a small, elegantly furnished room, and there, crouched in a corner, tiny again, and visible only because of the telltale strand of webbing still attached to it, was the spider—coiled in upon itself and buried under a pile of dust.

I flew up to it and yanked the strand, pulling the spider out of its corner. Its color changed from black to brown, and it began once more to grow. Two of its legs became long skinny hands emerging from dun-colored sleeves. Then it reared up on two other legs and I saw a tall thin man in a long monk's robe, his face turned away. I pulled again on the strand, but it came away in my hand and dissolved. Then the figure abruptly abandoned its reluctant demeanor and slowly turned around, smiling and gesturing for me to take a chair, which was a little silly in my condition. But if I'd been in my body I would have been more than ready to sit down. The spider—the alchemist—was Delbert Sneath.

Techniques

BRUNO DROPPED US off at the emergency clinic and said he would come back in a half hour or send Taylor. The clinic, a private one that Bruno had recommended, was brand new in every respect: new building, shiny walls, crisp young necro doctors fresh out of brilliant residencies at prestigious hospitals, and all the latest equipment. We were subjected to the usual prolonged discussion regarding payment and then the obligatory six-page questionnaire about hereditary taints. After an hour they ushered Bran into an examining room. Polly and I claimed to be family, and (its being an up-to-date clinic priding itself on humanistic treatment) we were allowed to accompany him. A nurse took his blood pressure and some X rays as well as blood and urine samples. Bran balked a little at the urine.

"What in God's name is all this for? I broke my bloody toe in a fall!"

The nurse said defensively that it was standard procedure, but pain was making Bran irritable. (That's what makes a "bad patient." People who react to pain and anxiety by becoming dependent, helpless, and docile are the "good patients.") I suggested to the nurse that

since it would hurt Bran to hobble over to the bathroom and piss in a bottle, why didn't I do it for him? I had to piss anyway, and she'd have her sample and everyone would be happy. But she wouldn't go for it. Bran finally took pity on her and being the chivalrous soul he is, delivered up his urine.

After another ten-minute wait—although there was no one else in the clinic—the doctor appeared. The three of us by that time were joking and laughing about something or other, which completely spoiled his entrance. The main point of the waiting is that you sit in this morguelike environment, feeling alone, anxious, and in pain, and with every passing sterile moment you want more desperately to be rescued; then, just when you can't stand it anymore, the doctor breezes in—cheerful, confident, matter-of-fact, and condescending, to put your fears to rest—a king tending democratically to his people. It's pure theater, and we had spoiled it by having a good time and stepping on his entrance. He looked a little sour as he examined the foot.

"My toe's broken," Bran said.

The doctor was really annoyed now. "Actually your toe *is* broken. You can see it in the X ray. We'll have to splint it."

"And my calf hurts here. I think I pulled a muscle."

"No," the doctor said, "that's what we call 'referred pain.' Your calf actually hurts *here*."

"Are you trying to tell me where I hurt?"

"Have you been to medical school? You seem to have a lot of medical opinions."

"I should like to point out that I have had almost fifty years of day-to-day experience living inside this body. You could almost say I know the intimate, inside story. I think that qualifies me to have opinions about it. You are, after all, seeing it for the first time."

"If you think you can treat yourself, I can't help wondering why you came here."

"I came to get a splint, not to be told what I'm feeling!"

"A lot of people are dead who thought they knew better than doctors!" And he strode out before anyone could answer.

A little while later a physician's assistant came in and did the splint. He also told Bran what to do for the muscle and was generally

helpful. But before we could leave, the doctor returned with a piece of paper in his hand and a triumphant expression on his face.

"Your blood test shows an asymptomatic anemia."

"What the devil is asymptomatic anemia? And if there aren't any symptoms, why should I be concerned about it?"

"Anemia is always something to be concerned about," the doctor said smugly.

As Bran was warming up for a response the nurse came back.

"Doctor?" she murmured apologetically. He glowered at her, but she pointed to the name on the piece of paper and handed him another, gently pulling the first from his puzzled grasp. "You picked up the wrong one."

The doctor reddened slightly, concentrating on the new form. "Well, there's a slight anomaly here, too. A borderline abnormality in your urine. To be on the safe side we should have a look at you with a catheter—"

"Have you gotten what you needed?" I asked Bran abruptly. When he nodded, I leaned over, pulled the sheet of paper out of the doctor's hands, and tore it into thirty-two pieces. "Let's go."

Polly, who'd been silently chewing a cuticle, jumped up and helped Bran off the table, and we marched and hobbled out, respectively. The doctor was momentarily stunned but collected himself enough to mutter to the nurse: "Make sure they pay the bill!"

When we got outside another hour had passed, but no one was waiting to pick us up. There was no place to sit down, and it was painful for Bran to stand. I called home on a pay phone but there was no answer. Then I called Bruno's house but there was no answer there, either. I decided that one of them must be on his way, so we walked Bran to a bench in a nearby park, where I left the two of them and hurried back to meet the car.

Since I had nothing to do while waiting, I called Peter on my credit card and told him about the harrowing adventure I'd just had. It wasn't very satisfying.

"I'm really surprised at you, Grace," he said. "It's appalling that with all your education and knowledge I still have to remind you of the futility of noncollective action."

It was clear that Peter and I were no longer operating in the same

universe, so I let the whole thing drop and asked him about his social change paper. I don't remember what he said.

By now there had been more than enough time for someone to arrive, and I began to think something was wrong. I tried both numbers again without success. I went back to the park and told Polly and Bran I was going to take a bus home and come back for them myself. Bran wanted to take the bus, too, but the bus stop was several blocks away and the buses would be packed with commuters, irritably indifferent to splinted feet as they desperately hurried home to raise their blood sugar. It wasn't hard to talk him out of going since Polly was twined around him like a spider monkey.

My route took me near the dojo, and I thought I might as well try one more phone call from there. It was closed, and the curtained windows were dark, which surprised me a little, since there was a class in thirty minutes and usually at this time Tsubaki or one of the other teachers was there warming up. I opened the door, which let in just enough light to see, and as I walked in a man peeled himself off the left-hand wall and hurled himself at me.

I was as furious as I was terrified and grabbed a wrist with the clear intention of breaking it. The next thing I knew I was falling, swept by my own momentum and the total absence of any resistance. Yet even as I rolled up on my feet again I still had hold of the wrist, although it felt very odd. I looked down. I was holding a mannequin's wrist and hand, which delicately clutched a wooden knife. Tsubaki walked over.

"Ahd-vanced technique!" he explained, grinning.

I shook my head helplessly and started to laugh, but it quickly turned into tears and uncontrollable shaking. Tsubaki was contrite and put his arm around me comfortingly (which was a little awkward because I was taller than he was). I explained, trying to pull myself together, that I'd had a hard day and told him my immediate problem. He offered to drive me home and on the way said he was trying to teach me the danger I placed myself in by being so "John Wayne"—that I should always remember, when I practiced, what it felt like to find myself meeting no resistance. Had I been attuned and connected, he said, I never would have lost my balance.

But the first time I had a chance to use this insight, I wasn't practicing.

Jurisdictional Disputes

I PROBABLY WOULD have accepted Sneath's invitation—however insincere—if I'd been able to. But while I was floating there, undecided, I felt a faraway tugging that rapidly increased in intensity, so that before Sneath had even straightened up from his gesture of hospitality, the scene in front of me collapsed and I was sucked back into my body.

It's always seemed to me that real life has a very poor sense of pacing. Instead of timing events with a nice even alternation between excitement and quiet it has this tendency to bunch things all up, so that you don't have a chance to process one calamity before another one is on top of you. The cause of my coming back into my body at such an inopportune moment was that I was being vigorously jostled, and when I opened my eyes there was Pat sitting on my bed shaking me roughly with one hand and holding a nasty-

looking hypodermic in the other. There was something cold and hard in the shaking hand, and when I sat up, struggling, he pushed the barrel of it into my chest and suggested that I would be most likely to achieve the average longevity for my age cohort if I would lie down and shut up.

"Time for a little interview, ol' buddy," he said, slipping into his obnoxious southern routine. "Just want to get a little idea where you been and what you seen. You've gotten to be such a little traveler! Regular Marco Polo! And without even leavin' this nice room here! I'm real anxious to hear 'bout your travels, now, so you just talk and I'll just listen. And I'm gonna make it real easy for you with this little needle, so don't move around and make me have to hurt you or get air in your veins, y'hear?"

But things were moving pretty fast now, and as Pat was readying the needle Bill lumped into the room. "These people are really informal for easterners," I thought. "They don't even knock, and they come right upstairs." I was still a little groggy from my premature reentry.

Pat seemed a little annoyed, too, although I couldn't see why he should feel intruded upon in *my* bedroom. "What the fuck do *you* want?" he growled.

"Mr. Muller's here."

"Mr. Muller can wait a few minutes. I'm busy."

"Mr. Muller can't wait," Bill said dully, shaking his head.

This was apparently going to be a big day for interrupted responses, because before Pat could yell at Bill or give me the needle or scratch his nose or do anything, Bill's left arm shot out and gripped Pat's thick neck as if it were a little willow switch. Pat's eyes bugged out, whether from shock or strangulation I'll never know, and he tried desperately to turn around and shoot Bill or stab him with the needle. But there was no turning against that strength, and a horrible snapping sound quickly put an end to his futile strugglings. Then Bill pocketed the gun, stuck the needle through Pat's shirt pocket as if he were pinning on a name tag, and tossed him on the bed beside me. I very promptly got out the other side.

"You come with me," Bill said, pushing a wad of his stringy disorderly hair out of his eyes.

A sense of gratitude and a deep respect for Bill's ability to enforce his requests both pointed to the same response, so I went.

The scene next door was another shocker. Six moving men in uniforms were packing up everything in the house and putting it in the enormous van that was parked in the driveway. The downstairs rooms were almost entirely bare.

"Where's Mr. Muller?" Bill asked.

"Upstairs," said one of the men. "He's busy."

"Come on, then," Bill said to me. He picked up a large, flat, unassembled packing carton and some tape and pushed me ahead of him back through the hedge to our house. We went up to my room again, where Bill assembled the carton, dumped Pat's body into it, taped it up, and motioned for me to help him carry it. We struggled down the stairs, back through the hedge, and directly to the van, where two of the moving men packed it in with some other cartons. Then Bill motioned me back into his house. He took me to a small empty upstairs room where I sat on the floor with him opposite, watching me with a completely vacant stare. I closed my eyes.

"Stay here!" he grunted. I opened them again—and left them open. We sat like that, staring at each other, for two hours, until a man came in to say that Mr. Muller wanted Bill downstairs right away. Bill motioned me to come along. As we went past the upstairs rooms I saw that everything had been completely stripped and packed into the van, and when I got downstairs everything was gone except in the living room, where two men were standing next to a large empty carton. Beside them was a short, pudgy man who was giving instructions and was apparently Mr. Muller. With a numb flicker of interest I recognized the man who had rescued us in Denver and taken the Gormanizers. I heard a car door slam and Muller motioned to Bill, who took up a position beside the front door.

Almost immediately the front door burst open and Jack rushed in. Bill slammed the door behind him and Jack looked around, stunned. What he saw must have told him more than it told Pat, because he immediately wheeled about and tried to get out again. But Bill was ready. His huge hand gripped Jack's throat before Jack could even reach the doorknob, and I heard that nasty popping sound for the second and I hope last time in my life. (Even the memory produces a

throb of nausea.) I noticed, with that glazed scientific curiosity that sometimes comes with shock, that Bill was ambidextrous.

Mr. Muller's team was big on division of labor. When Jack was clearly dead, Bill simply dropped him to the floor and went out to the van. The two remaining moving men plopped the body into the waiting carton, taped it up, and followed. There wasn't a single movable object left in the house. Only Mr. Muller and myself. He paused and looked at me very directly.

"Please take notice of the fact that you're still alive. Please remember also that we were the people who kept you that way. You've helped us eliminate two very dangerous men. We don't need you anymore. You won't be bothered any further by anyone as long as you don't bother us. No one has seen any of this but you. If you tell anyone, they will probably want to hospitalize you, and we will make sure that they do. If you forget all about it, you can live a normal life. So take my advice and go back to California. You'll find everything's blown over by now. No one's following you, no one's looking for you, no one cares about you. Try to keep it that way, okay?"

I nodded stupidly. "Would you mind telling me, just so that I don't think about it all the time, who they were? Jack and Pat?"

"They were KGB agents engaged in technological espionage, among other things. And doing a sloppy job of it. I'm surprised no one got to them before we did."

I was shocked. I always thought Soviet spies were gray, middle-aged men who lived alone in urban apartments and were described by their neighbors as having been "a nice, quiet polite man who kept to himself." Of course suicides and murderers are always described that way, too.

"What about you?" I asked. "Who do you work for?"

"We work for the U.S. government."

"But what about those people in Denver? They said they were federal agents, too."

He smiled slowly, the first and only deviation from his "strictly business" demeanor I ever saw.

"We're from a different agency."

PART THREE

The Island

Disillusion

ON THE WAY back to the park Taylor and I compared notes and tried to make sense out of what had happened. Bruno and Pat had obviously been playing a complicated game: Soviet spies posing as corporate spies posing as electronics engineers. In their corporate spy role they had run afoul of Maud, and in their international spy role they had met an even more lethal opponent in the Admirable Cretin, who had apparently been installed to keep an eye on them. But who was Muller? And why did Pat and Bruno think they were working for him?

"He's probably a Soviet agent, too!" I said. "Getting rid of a couple of pawns who were about to embarrass him."

Taylor frowned. "Then why would he bother to tell me Pat and Jack were agents? I wouldn't have even thought of it otherwise. And why would he say that stuff about working for the U.S. government?"

"Because he thinks we're stupid."

"But why raise our suspicions in the first place? It seems kind of unnecessary."

I had to agree. "But why else would he have killed all those agents in Denver?"

Taylor shook his head. "None of it makes sense. And how do *we* figure in it?"

"It's *you,* precious. All those bugs were in *your* room. The whole thing was set up from the very beginning. But you know what I'd like to know most? Where Sneath fits in."

"Maybe he's Muller's boss."

"Off the wall! How do you get that?"

"Muller has to work for *somebody,*" Taylor said stubbornly, "and what about that wino in Denver with the Molotov cocktail or whatever it was? Muller called him 'chief.'"

The nagging familiarity of that skinny, elegant derelict pushed itself over the threshold of my consciousness. Why *not* Sneath, with his mobile home right outside of town?

"And Louise knows about him. She knew he was spying at Steinkopf—"

"But he drugged us before we even *met* Louise. How did he know who we were? And why did he care? We had barely started out. We didn't even know what we were doing."

"We *still* don't! We've got to do something, Taylor! Those nippleheads have got Iris installed in the White House by now!"

Taylor looked helpless. "What do you want to do, sneak into Washington and kill him?"

I nodded vigorously, but it was just excess energy. The whole thing was much too delicate: Any violent shock could override Iris's inhibitory suggestions and provoke a missile launching. And Iris was as closely guarded as the president. There was no way for us to get at him—and a high risk of catastrophe if we succeeded.

"At least call Louise," I said lamely.

While Taylor went to call I waited in the car, mentally launching and aborting an array of action schemes.

"She'll meet us at Fresh Pond in an hour," he said when he came back. "We'd better hurry. Polly and Bran must be getting worried."

We had decided to tell them everything that had happened except for the parts having to do with Steinkopf and Sneath. I dreaded Polly's reaction.

Their voices drifted over to us as soon as we shut off the engine. Bran was sprawled out on the bench with his injured foot propped up on a box Polly had found somewhere, and Polly was crouched kneeling on the bench facing him and conducting with both arms as they sang one of Polly's ballads in harmony. We waited until they had finished, applauded briefly, and bundled them into the car. They seemed so happy, Taylor and I exchanged glances, tacitly agreeing to postpone telling them until we talked to Louise. We had to hope that in the darkness they wouldn't notice that the house next door was empty. We helped Bran upstairs and left Polly in charge of feeding and doing whatever else she wanted with him, which promised to be a lot.

When we got to the Fresh Pond parking lot we were greeted by a strange sight. Surrounding the only car in the lot were what looked like six statues of teenage boys in a variety of violent and extreme postures, as if they had been quick-frozen while break-dancing. We approached the car cautiously, wending our way through what proved to be actual boys doing brilliant but apparently involuntary renditions of catatonia. Louise was in the driver's seat and Barghest was sprawled out in the back. We got into the front. Barghest, with that penchant for unrequited affection that afflicts all large, active dogs, immediately began slobbering on the back of my neck.

"They wanted to steal Kali's car," Louise explained. "Didn't think she'd like it. She doesn't like boys much anyway."

I let Taylor tell her all that had happened because I wanted to see how she reacted. She was quiet and listened carefully, then asked a question or two about Muller and several about the struggle with the spider. She seemed to be particularly interested in how easy or difficult it had been for Taylor to "catch" the spider and follow it to Sneath's Maine hideaway. Her questions about the latter were so picky and abstruse that I had trouble paying attention: things like whether the sticky stuff appeared before or after the spider froze and

how long it had taken for Sneath to turn around. Finally she seemed satisfied. Now it was my turn.

"You said a tourist came through and asked you to be on that TV show after you fixed his car. What did he look like?" She started to answer too quickly, and I knew it was the wrong question. "Was it Sneath?"

She shook her head. "Sneath's tall and skinny, right? This fella was short and kinda pudgy. Wore a plaid shirt and suspenders, like a real down-home dude." She snickered.

"Muller?" I asked, pushing Barghest's nose away from my neck for the tenth time.

"How come you need me to tell you what you already know?"

"Jesus Christ, Louise! No more games! Who *are* they? What are they after? Who do they represent? Are you working with them?"

"Which one you want me to answer?"

I glared at her. "All of them!"

Taylor was quiet, sitting between us. I could feel his discomfort even though I couldn't see his face very well in the darkness.

"Look, Captain," she said, after a pause, "Sneath is a powerful man. He doesn't confide in me. He says he wants what we want, but whether that's true or not you'll have to decide."

"And just how are we supposed to decide?"

"We'll go there," Taylor broke in suddenly. "We'll go to the island and find him."

"And then what? What good is that?"

"We'll find out who he is and what he's all about," Taylor said matter-of-factly.

"Like we did last time?"

"We'll be more careful."

"But what good is it going to do to go to Maine? The danger's in Washington! *That*'s where we should be going."

Louise broke in at this point. "No. There's nothin' you can do there. You just leave that one to us."

"Who's 'us'?" I asked quickly, holding Barghest at bay with my arm over the backseat.

"Friends. Allies. This ain't somethin' to fool around with, children. You got to understand that. What you can do and what you

can't." Her voice was sharper and more serious than I'd ever heard it. I was almost intimidated.

"So what do you suggest we do?" I asked. "Go home and pretend nothing's happened?"

"That'd be the best advice I could give you. You'd be safe there now. You could just get your friends and your little girl and go home. Say good-bye, and that'd be the end of it." She paused. "But I don't think you'd buy it."

"Don't be sneaky, Louise!" I could see the hook under the bait. "What do you *want* us to do?"

She squirmed. Barghest whined unhappily.

"Well . . . I'm kind of partial to Taylor's idea. The two of you could be a real help there. It'd be the most important thing you've done yet. But I can't *advise* you to do it, 'cause it ain't safe. I can't protect you. Any way. I don't know what he'll want to do with you. But whatever it is, he'll do it. I can't do anything about it. Once you get on that freeway you're on your own."

She delivered all this with a subdued, hesitant air that gave me chills. Without realizing it, I'd slid into the comfortable supine posture of seeing Louise as some kind of omnipotent being, and now she was pulling the rug out and letting me bounce around on a cold stone floor. But I wasn't going to give it up without a struggle.

"If you're so helpless, how did you do *that?*" I asked, pointing to the adolescents still scattered around the car like abandoned chessmen.

"*That!* I could teach you *that* in two years," she snorted, with a little of her old spirit. Then she slumped back. "What you'll need there—"

"What *do* we need?" I asked. "What do you want us to do there?"

"You'll see when you get there. I can't tell you."

"Come with us and help!"

"No. I can't go. I got other business. And if you're worried you shouldn't go either."

"Of course we're worried! We'd have to be stupid not to be worried! After what he did last time? And after watching that Muller kill people all over the place with the emotion of a man setting his watch?"

"*I'm* going," Taylor said, his voice trembling. "I *have* to!"

I realized with a shock that he was crying. He was also gripping my arm with incredible urgency.

"Okay! We'll go! I never said I wouldn't go!" I turned to Louise. "You can't even give us some advice? Or a gadget, like the Gormanizer? What the fuck kind of fairy godmother *are* you?"

She didn't even cackle. She just shook her head. "Anything that'd help, I've already given you."

"And what about Iris? Why did Taylor spend all that time finding out about him? Now that we know, what do we do?"

"Sneath has a plan. Maybe he'll tell you."

"But Sneath was there the whole time! Why did *Taylor* need to be there? If we're not going to do anything?"

"You'll be doin' something. Believe me."

"Taylor, let's get out of here!"

I was doing it again—getting impatient and letting Louise off the hook. But I was scared she'd say something that would disillusion me even more. I opened the car door and got out, Barghest sneaking in a last wet lollop when I relaxed my grip on his neck. Louise started the car.

"Mind moving some of those boys out of the way so I can drive out of here?" she asked.

I didn't answer. Taylor came over and helped me shift two of them to give Louise a clear path. It was awkward: They weren't at all rigid and would slide gradually into any posture under pressure and then stay that way. As soon as there was a path Louise drove out, waving as she went. Taylor waved back dispiritedly. I didn't.

When we got into our car we discovered a new problem. As soon as Louise had left, the statues began to unfreeze, and by the time we had started up they were racing toward us. I slammed the car in gear and headed for the exit as fast as I could. Two of them were blocking the way. But it wasn't a good time to play chicken with me—I was in a very surly mood and not about to be bullied by some stupid kid. I accelerated as I got closer. One of them leapt out of the way. The other one jumped on the hood and tried to reach in the window. That was a mistake. I grabbed his wrist, brought it down on the frame hard enough to break it, twisted it viciously, and let go. By that time *he* had let go with his other hand, screaming with pain. He

went flying onto the pavement as we turned out into the street, narrowly missing a passing motorist who honked and gave us the finger.

We drove a while in silence.

"Are you okay?" Taylor asked.

"I'm okay."

"Do you feel okay about going?"

"Of course."

He seemed relieved.

"What does it mean to you? Going? You got so upset."

"It's just a feeling. I was afraid . . . you wouldn't."

I patted his arm. "You think I'd let you go alone?"

We both fell into gloom again, gagging on the sour taste of Louise as Sneath's pawn. Her feebleness and uncertainty in the car were shattering to me, and I knew it must be even worse for Taylor.

"We'll leave first thing in the morning," I said, trying to put some bounce into my voice.

"What should we tell Polly and Bran?"

"That Bruno and Pat were spies, that they've been caught, that you and I are in the clear, and that Polly doesn't have to worry anymore. And that we're taking a few days' vacation to celebrate. When do you have to be at work next?"

"Not until Monday. I'm not going to worry about it."

"Really. Louise made it sound like we'd be lucky to get back." I stopped. "What am I doing? I can't go up there! What would Athene do if something happened to me?"

"What will she do if the bombs start dropping?"

"You think anything we do will make a difference?"

"Louise seemed to think—"

"Who cares what Louise thinks!"

Taylor was quiet for a minute. I started to say something conciliatory but he interrupted.

"Sneath could finish us off anytime he wanted. Anyway, he invited me."

I let myself get convinced by this argument, which shows how much I wanted to go. But the alternative was to hover around the Cape for two weeks waiting for something to happen and hoping it didn't happen before Waite's time with Athene was up.

When we got home I called Waite and told him we were going to be traveling for a few days, that I would be in touch, and that he could leave messages with Polly or Bran in an emergency. There was a long pause at the other end as he tried to figure out whether there was anything in this for him.

"Waite?"

"Yeah . . . uh, how long are you . . . ?"

"I'm not sure. A few days. A week at the most."

"Yeah, well, what do I do if Athene needs to see you?"

"Same thing you would have done if I'd stayed in California like you expected me to."

"Yeah, but it's different now."

"Has she been wanting to see me?"

"No. . . ."

"What is it, Waite? What do you want?"

"Well, I don't know, it's just . . . unexpected."

"What's the problem?" And then, like a fool, I took the bait. "Is she all right? Is she upset? Is she okay?"

"No. . . . She's all right, I guess. . . ."

"What do you mean, 'you guess'? Is she or isn't she?"

When I finally got off the phone, after being dragged back and forth through Waite's wimpy morass for almost an hour (until I insisted on talking to Athene, who was her normal, cheerful, enthusiastic self), I was exhausted. Polly's room was empty and judging from the sounds emanating from the master bedroom the two of them wouldn't be available for conversation for quite some time.

"Why don't we tell them in the morning?" Taylor suggested wearily. "We can wake them up."

I nodded, relieved. We said good night and I packed a few things in a little bag, set my alarm, and collapsed into bed, eager for oblivion.

But it didn't come. First I spent a half hour imagining myself as a village blacksmith performing a variety of smithy-type operations on Waite's face. Then I struggled with a kind of sick horror at the demise of my image of Louise. And in the middle of all that it suddenly hit me that Bruno was dead, and I surprised myself by crying a little. Even though he was a necrophiliac asshole and a creepy spy to boot, I had known him and slept with him and seen

that tiny fragment of humanity that lies buried under all those tons of insensitivity in guys like that. And although I know from experience that those fragments won't grow or blossom or be anything more than a tease and a snare and a delusion, I couldn't help crying to see one of them snuffed out. After all, we don't just mourn the good and the wonderful. We mourn the people we know.

Then all the other events of the day came back to frighten and annoy and confuse and depress me. And as I looked back over the past months, a horrible thought struck me. If Muller really was a Soviet agent—as seemed most plausible, despite his odd claim—and if Sneath was his boss—as also seemed likely—then Sneath was also a Soviet agent, and so was Louise, and so were we. What if in our naïve and fatuous attempt to outwit one group of deadmen, we had simply played right into the hands of another? What if all our efforts had served no purpose other than to give the Soviets a competitive edge? And with that depressing thought came another: We were traitors and spies and would be hunted for the rest of our lives until caught, despite Muller's reassurances.

But then why had Pat and Bruno bothered to spy on us? Why did Pat need to get information from Taylor that his boss already had . . . and that Louise could have told him? Nothing made any sense and I was getting a headache.

I tried thinking about Polly and Bran to lighten things up, but it didn't help. In the abstract I wished them happiness, but when it came right down to the moment I was pretty pissed off that they were having such a good time when I was so miserable. I had a malicious urge to march into their room and stop them in mid-orgasm with the gruesome details of the day's killings.

No one was safe from my bad humor. As I tossed and turned I began to wonder what Taylor was going through. Probably sleeping like a baby, the little fart. Maybe even out of his body flying around the countryside, sightseeing. I thrashed some more and pounded my pillow irritably. I heard another little moan from Bran's room. Weren't they ever going to stop? She was just getting back at me for sleeping with Bruno. I wrapped the pillow around my ears.

Fortunately it didn't deaden all sound, or I wouldn't have heard the quiet little knock on my door.

"Who is it?"

"It's me." It was Taylor.

"Come on in."

He did, and sat on the edge of the bed.

"I can't sleep."

"I can't either."

"I was thinking. . . . How would you feel about leaving right now?"

I could have kissed him. Suddenly he looked surprisingly attractive in his bare chest and briefs. I jumped out of bed and pulled on a pair of jeans.

"Let's go!"

"We could leave them a note. . . ."

I wrote one, saying we were taking a two-day trip and would call them and not to worry, that everything was fine. Taylor wondered if we ought to explain about the neighbors.

"Forget it! When they see the empty house they'll just have to invent their own theories. It'll give them something to do when they're tired of fucking." I was still a little grumpy.

"But they'll be frightened. They'll never believe we're just vacationing."

So I added a note that we'd explain about the neighbors when we got back—that they had been the cause of the weird things that had happened and that we could all rest easy now.

An hour and a half later we crossed the bridge that goes from Portsmouth, New Hampshire, to Kittery, Maine. It was just 3:00 A.M. I gave Taylor the wheel of the Coupe and promptly fell into a deep sleep.

Sea and Sand

IT SEEMED FUNNY to me that after I couldn't sleep at all in my bed I nodded off in the car before we were even out of Boston. We took Storrow Drive along the river, which looked dark and still and peaceful under the city lights. I felt better now that we were on our way, and when I looked over at Grace she seemed a lot happier, too. Driving as she always did, even in the coldest weather, with the window open, her arm draped on the sill, the other hand on the wheel, and her dark hair blowing, her face began to relax under the caress of the warm night. I watched her for a long time, thinking how much we'd been through together and how much I'd come to depend on her being there, and how great it was to have her with me, and how awful it would have been to have to do it all alone. I had never let myself feel too much toward Grace. She was an old friend, and I'd always been a little bit intimidated by her energy and

her intellect and her opinions. But there she was. I felt a wave of gratitude that she had stayed with me all this time, when I was just operating on crazy intuition and had long since given up trying to put reasons behind what I was doing.

I hadn't let myself feel how attractive she was—how much sexuality there was in all that restless, challenging energy. But I was feeling it now, and when she turned suddenly and smiled at me with those bold, intense blue eyes, I stopped breathing for a second.

"Here we go again, space hero," she said.

I didn't know what she meant by it, but she squeezed my hand affectionately so I guess it was all right. It left me with such a confusion of different feelings that I found myself drifting off to sleep just as we started to cross the Mystic River Bridge. Sleep comes to my rescue sometimes when I'm uncertain about things.

When I woke up, I was still on a bridge, and I thought for a moment that I'd just drifted off for a few seconds. But when I looked around I saw it was a different bridge, and it was my turn to drive.

It wasn't all that clear to me how we were going to get to the island. I could find it flying, all right, but I didn't have the faintest idea how to approach it by land. I had looked at the map before going to bed and I was pretty sure that Shutter Island was the one I wanted, but what was the best jumping-off point on the mainland? And where would I get a boat? The logical choice was Portland, since it was a city and would be likely to have whatever facilities we'd need, but for some reason I wasn't drawn to it. The other approach would be from one of the peninsulas to the northeast, but were there harbors there? And would they have boats for rent? I had forty miles on the Maine Turnpike to make the choice and I finally decided that for once, considering the importance of the situation, I'd go for the practical approach. So I took the Portland exit and headed into the city. Then I began to wonder what I'd do when we got there. It was only 4:00 A.M. Should we park and sleep? Should I try to save time by finding the waterfront first? Was a waterfront area a good place to go to sleep? How big a city was Portland, and what was it like? I was tempted to wake Grace up and see what ideas she had, but she was sleeping soundly and I was getting too used to relying on her decisiveness. I rounded what looked like some kind of small bay, still

heading, so I thought, toward the city. But the houses now began to thin out, and after a few miles I saw a sign and realized I had bypassed Portland and was heading north again. "Well," I thought, "so much for being rational."

It was getting more and more important to me to have achieved something before Grace woke up: Either to find our port of embarkation or get some information about it. Or *something*. I felt pretty sure I couldn't do anything useful in Portland at four in the morning, but I now realized with a sinking feeling that I was heading into the boonies, and if anyplace was going to be open in the middle of the night it would be in Portland, not out in the middle of nowhere. I was starting to berate myself for fucking up and going the wrong way—out of the sheer inertia of not wanting to stop—when I saw a sign that said L.L. BEAN EXIT—12 MILES. I remembered that the L.L. Bean store was in Freeport, which was only a little out of my way, and that it never closed. I could stop, get the information, and buy some things we needed, and then we could park in their lot and sleep for a couple of hours.

The man in Bean's was very helpful. When I asked him if he knew of an island with two towers on it he brought out a postcard with a picture of Bailey's Island, showing two towers rising out of a stand of evergreens. It was the southern end of the island, and there was a tiny islet off the end of it, which I also remembered from my "flight." I was a little surprised that it was Bailey's since I had convinced myself that Shutter Island was the one I was looking for. But there were the two towers, unmistakably.

"Do you know where I can find a boat to get out there? Are there places where you can rent boats by the day?"

He laughed. "Boat? Wunt need a boat git to Bailey's. Just drive right on out."

"It's an island!"

"Yep. But there's a bridge goes right to it."

"But when I—"

I was about to say that when I flew down the tower the island was in the middle of the bay and didn't have any bridge, but I thought better of it.

"Want to rent boats, there's places right there on Bailey's."

I thanked him and bought a heavy-duty flashlight, some new

tennies, and a waterproof windbreaker, although I probably wouldn't need it now that we weren't going to go by boat. I was a little disappointed because I had been looking forward to the boat ride. As a teenager I was a boat fanatic, but I couldn't stomach the boating types—too many florid, alcoholic WASPs with political beliefs to the right of Nero, as Grace would say. Still, I've always loved boats. And there's something especially exciting about a *necessary* boat trip. (In northern California there's hardly anywhere that you *have* to go to by boat.)

He gave me directions and said we could stay in the parking lot. When I got back to the car Grace was still asleep, so I crawled in the backseat and went out like a light.

Grace woke me up at eight o'clock.

"Taylor, where are we? How do I get out of here?"

When I told her, she wanted to run in and check out Bean's herself, and she came back with a windbreaker just like mine and two caps.

"Aren't they heavenly? We'll be twins. Dauntless explorers of the Arctic wilderness. I got another flashlight, too, so we won't fight over yours."

She looked ravishing in her cap and I was sure I looked idiotic in mine, but she seemed delighted with the effect so I kept it on. She was in high spirits and we made better time to Bailey's than we should have.

Bailey's Island, it turned out, was really part of a twelve-mile peninsula composed of three islands connected by bridges. The drive was intermittently spectacular, emerging every so often from the woods to reveal the ocean or a long bay, with islands scattered everywhere. The bridge to Bailey's was the longest of the three, and the minute we had crossed it I knew we were in the wrong place. Except for twenty or thirty acres at the outermost tip, where the towers were, Bailey's was almost bald, but thickly covered with houses where the trees should have been. Sneath's island, although I had never explored it fully, was covered with trees. I was positive.

We drove to the end, where there was a gift shop and a couple of private homes. When we found the towers I knew they weren't the ones, although the differences were subtle. I had a spell of self-doubt. I remembered the dead spiders in the light globe in Denver.

Was it possible that there was some major difference in how things were perceived in and out of the body—a difference that had somehow eluded me before? Maybe the towers were just some kind of metaphor or something. But hadn't most of my out-of-the-body perceptions checked out? I decided the towers didn't matter. I'd know that island when I saw it, towers or no towers. I looked out over the bay, streaked with long peninsulas and dotted with islands—some low and grassy, some dense with evergreens. It was out there somewhere. Maybe the best thing to do was just rent a boat and go hunt for it.

Grace was unusually patient during all my uncertainty—I think because she was so smitten with the beauty of her surroundings. She climbed about on the rocks, smelling the wind and soaking up the view, and had to be physically restrained from stripping and plunging into the icy water.

"There's no time, Grace."

"Just for a minute!"

"*Boat,* Grace!" I was careful to put a lot of emphasis on the word. "We've got to find a *boat!*"

At the sound of the magic word she became startlingly docile. "Boat. Right." She sighed. "Boats are nice."

"*Very* nice. Nice boat."

"Nice boat."

She allowed herself to be pulled off the rocks, not without a few wistful backward glances.

They told us at the gift shop that there was a place about a half mile away that had small boats for rent, but when we got there the man said they were all taken.

"What about that one?" Grace asked, pointing to a small wooden lobster boat with an inboard engine and an open cockpit. It was kind of seedy-looking, but I could see why she was drawn to it.

The man shook his head.

"Ain't insured."

I told him we might need it for as long as a week and would pay for a week even if it turned out to be less. He perked up a little but still seemed reluctant. He said he'd bought it to fix up and resell, and it still needed a lot of work.

At this point Grace went into high gear. She wanted that boat.

"What did you pay for it?"

"Twenty-five hundred."

"What a great deal! What did you do, get them drunk?"

He relinquished a chuckle.

"What do you plan to do on it?" she continued.

"Well, I did some work on the engine. Needs new rudder cables, too. Thought I'd put a little cabin on her, paint her up. Might even keep her."

"Show me what you did on the engine."

She took his arm, which I felt was overdoing it with a down-east introvert, but Grace is pretty good at reading what the traffic will bear, and the chummier she got the better he liked it and the more he opened up. She knew enough about engines to ask intelligent questions and enough about men not to let on that she knew the answers. I was afraid that sooner or later she'd rebel against all this self-imposed accommodation and blow it, but when Grace wants something badly enough she can put her politics, sexual and otherwise, on hold. She did the whole bit: letting her hair fall on his shoulder as they looked at the spark plugs, absently caressing parts of the engine while she was talking, listening intently with her eyes riveted on his (for the few seconds that he was able to hold contact), and getting a deftly placed smudge on her cheek. I watched them from the dock, wondering, as the man went into ever more intricate detail, how New Englanders ever got their reputation for taciturnity.

Finally they climbed out.

"Look," Grace said, "I'll make a deal. We'll give you three hundred dollars up front. That'll cover any minor damage. And if we total it you can have my car. Okay?"

I think he would have taken less.

We bought some food and loaded it into the boat with our sleeping bags and two totes with our clothes. Then I asked him the big question.

"Is this the only island around here with towers on it?"

"Nope."

"Which—"

"Shutter Island. Out there." He pointed seaward to a large, hazy hump of trees in the far distance. "That's got two just like these here.

Used to, anyway. Haven't seen 'em for years. Maybe they tore 'em down."

"What were they for?"

"Built 'em in World War II. So's we could see the Germans coming. Had barracks and artillery all over the island. Tunnels underground. Probably all fallen in by now. No one goes there anymore. Don't even know who owns it. Say, if that's where you're heading, you'll need a chart. Lots of rocks out there, and they ain't all marked. Lotta wrecked boats and drownings out that way."

He got us a chart and pointed out the island—right where I'd always thought it was, although everything always looks different when you're on the water.

"Only place to land is a dock around here on the west side. Don't know what kind of shape it's in."

We thanked him and cast off.

"Keep an eye on them rudder cables," he shouted as we pulled away from the dock.

Grace was in heaven. The wind came up a little as we chugged out of the long cove into the bay, and she pulled her cap down and sprawled on a seat in the bow. I waited for her to ask me if I knew where I was going, but she didn't seem to care. I guess, to tell you the truth, I was pretty happy, too. Part of me wanted the boat trip to take a real long time, and I was tempted to go out of my way. I hadn't been in a boat for years, and I wanted to explore every island, cove, harbor, inlet, sound, and river mouth.

"What are you thinking about, skipper? Are we on course?" she asked.

"Someday, if we survive all this, let's come back, okay? We'll rent this boat again and go all over the bay. We'll take two weeks, and every day we'll go to a different place and have a picnic. And we'll camp out sometimes, and when we're tired of camping we'll find a great motel right on the water." After I'd said it, it sounded a little funny and I got embarrassed. "We can bring Athene."

Grace laughed. "Sure we will." She pushed the brim of her cap up and then almost lost it when the wind caught it. "I think it's a great idea. I love it here." She turned around again and lost herself in the view.

We crossed the sound and threaded our way between two islands through a narrow winding channel marked by a series of buoys. Standing alone on a point of one of the islands was a little white gazebo, and as we went by a woman waved her handkerchief. She was very far away and seemed to be wearing something white with a high neck. There was nothing around the gazebo but a thick forest of evergreens—nothing to contradict the fantasy that we were in a scene from the 1870s.

With one eye on the chart and Grace acting as lookout, I slipped between two large rocks and headed out to sea, keeping the larger of the islands on my port side. I was cheating a little, in the sense that there was a quicker and duller route, but I didn't see what difference a half hour or so would make and I wasn't at all sure this wouldn't be our last boat ride in this lifetime.

Far ahead of us was a long reef with waves breaking over it, and as we gradually drew nearer Grace began to take an interest in the chart.

"We go to the west of it," I explained, "till we're close to this island here, and then straight on till . . . morning."

"So we avoid these, right?" She pointed on the chart to a mass of reefs and rocks with two tiny steep-sided islets in the middle of them. "'Mink Rocks'—that sounds really sexy. I bet they're all covered with dark brown seaweed. Mmm! Can I take the wheel for a while?"

"Sure. Sou'west by south." I waved vaguely at the horizon and flopped over the bow, so my head was hanging over the side and my hands would get splashed intermittently. I get really stoned that way, watching the bow wave. Sometimes I see little creatures playing in it, but whether they're real or not I've never been completely sure. I must have gone into a pretty deep alpha state because we were well past the Mink Rocks, an hour later, when Grace brought me out of it.

"I didn't see anything where all those Mink Rocks are supposed to be—just the two big ones," she called out. "It must be high tide."

"They're only exposed at low water. It looks like there's almost a little lagoon in there. The bigger rocks protect it from the ocean side. But at low tide you can probably walk all around it."

"I want to see it at low tide. Let's stop on the way back. If we're still alive."

I nodded. I didn't want to think about that. Meanwhile Shutter Island was looming up ahead. It was about a mile long and half as wide, solidly covered with trees. The shoreline consisted mostly of rocks, with occasional small beaches. I didn't see any buildings of any kind, collapsed or not. No towers, nothing but trees. We came up to it on the west side, as instructed, and I started looking for the dock, but all I could see were a few pilings. The dock had long since been reclaimed by the sea along with all the pilings close to the shore, which was shallow at this point with rocks and beach interspersed.

"We should have brought a dinghy," Grace said. "We'll have to anchor and swim in."

We circled slowly for a while until we found a rocky place where we could get close to shore. Then we threw all our gear on the rocks, including the clothes we had on, and went back out to anchor the boat.

Shivering in the brisk afternoon breeze that had come up, we jumped in the icy water and swam in to shore. It was only about thirty yards but I was almost paralyzed by the time we got out. We dried off in the sun and wind and quickly got dressed again, putting on more clothes than would ordinarily be needed for a sunny summer afternoon, even in Maine. Then we hid all our gear in some bushes, except for the flashlights, and started up a skinny, overgrown path into the woods. Once we left the beach and were cut off from the ocean breeze, we were hot again, but we didn't really regret all our clothes because the minute we hit the path we were attacked by a million unemployed mosquitoes.

After a hundred yards or so the path forked. If the towers were still there, they would be at the southern end, toward the open sea, so that was the path we took. It wound through pines, ferns, bushes, and at one point through a forest of little spruce trees whose branches—sometimes almost touching across the path—were linked by a shoal of cobwebs suspended at eye level like a layer of clouds so that we had to keep ducking under them. I felt as if we were in some cinematic fantasy sequence, silently moving through a forest no one had ever entered before. But this sensation quickly dissolved when we passed the remains of a row of barracks and came upon what had obviously been a jail. The roof and one wall were gone, but the bars

on the windows were still intact. I ran inside and struck a prisoner-type pose at the window, while Grace snapped an imaginary picture.

The towers were nowhere to be seen. After a while the trees began to thin out, and we could see snatches of ocean between them. We stumbled into a pit of circular concrete, which had apparently been an artillery emplacement, and another row of collapsed barracks. A telephone pole rose eerily from a clump of bayberry bushes, a single wire dangling uselessly from the crossbar like an abandoned Savior.

The path now disintegrated into a delta of questionable tracks to the edge of the cliffs above the shore. We followed one and climbed down to the stony beach below, still looking about for the towers but mostly enjoying the chance to poke around on the beach, eat our food, and look at the spectacular view out over the ocean. I saw the lighthouse on its rock off to the east, which made me feel a lot better, and Portland was obviously off to the southwest somewhere in that sunny haze, behind a cluster of islands. Suddenly I didn't care about the towers.

We dawdled. Grace was wading barefoot over seaweed-covered rocks, slipping and sliding in pursuit of novel marine creatures. I was skipping stones and blissing out watching the sun dance on the water: pools of color punctuated by diamond eyes . . . expanding . . . contracting . . . inhaling . . . exhaling. . . .

"Taylor!"

I looked up. Grace was standing on a rock, pointing. I felt a stab of pain, thinking she'd found the towers. "Let me just hang on a minute longer," I thought: looking at Grace, back-lit by the afternoon sun on the water, calling to me and smiling, and waving for me to come over. Barefoot, her hat, shoes, and windbreaker abandoned on the beach, her jeans rolled up to her knees and the sleeves of her jersey pushed up to the elbows, her hair blowing across her proud, eager neck. . . .

"Taylor! Come here, quick!"

I sighed and went over. She grabbed my hand and pointed again. A baby sea gull was staggering across some rocks. Every few steps it would fall over on its side and struggle mightily, feet and wings flailing, before righting itself. When it reached the water, it plunged in with a little shake of relief and began to paddle seaward with the

impertinent self-importance of a toy tugboat. But its troubles were only beginning: Each wave that washed in across the rocks picked up the tiny bird and smashed it back against the shore, where it would stagger up, a little dazed, and start all over again.

"Scouts to the rescue!" Grace shouted, and we ran over to help. Capturing the bird was easy enough, since it couldn't fly yet, but no matter where we put it in the water the same thing happened. Finally we found a quiet spot in the lee of a big rock where we could launch our protégé in a more westerly direction and get it far enough from shore so it could ride over the first wave. Paddling furiously, but with a dignity that brooked no expressions of gratitude, it moved sedately out to sea.

We watched it for several minutes, like proud parents seeing a child off to school. When we turned to congratulate each other we became conscious of the fact that we were holding hands, and what was casual and unselfconscious before suddenly became momentous. We looked at each other for a long time.

"I love you, Grace." I said it before I realized it.

She smiled and kissed me experimentally. Then she stopped, looked at me again, and came back, nibbling, as if it had tasted good. I kind of lost it then, caressing her face and hair and kissing her neck and throat in a blind rush. She pushed me away, still smiling, and then peeled off her jersey and backed up a little, teasing. I took mine off, too, and went toward her. We were both standing ankle deep in water, our feet numb with cold. Grace was holding her jersey bunched in her left hand, and one sleeve was trailing in the water, nudged back and forth by the waves.

It embarrasses me a little to talk about this—makes it seem kind of public. Which it was, in a way, out there on the end of that island, exposed to the universe. But I don't think anyone was actually watching and I don't think it would have stopped us if they had been. I was kissing her breasts and she was pressing me against her and kissing the back of my neck and sliding her free hand into my crotch. I think we might have gone on making love right there until we drowned or our feet turned blue, but at some point, in an access of passion, Grace flung her left arm around my neck so hard that it whipped the wet sleeve of her dangling jersey out of the water and

around in an arc, slapping us both in the face. This brought us around long enough to get out of the water, run over to a soft bit of sand, and shed the rest of our clothes.

I don't think sand is a very good terrain for protracted lovemaking, because it adheres to you and after a while there are hardly any surfaces left that aren't all grainy. But it didn't really matter because we weren't being at all leisurely. We had waited so long to admit we wanted each other, we were kind of frenzied and desperate. I'd been taught (by some dedicated but not real objective teachers) that intercourse was something you only got around to after a woman had already had at least one orgasm, but we had hardly hit the ground before we were plunging around wildly on the sand. My own orgasm was so intense I lost consciousness for a second—although it might also have been because Grace sort of strangled me a little when she had hers.

We lay around on the sand a while in each other's arms, not saying much, until it began to get cold, and we realized the sun was getting lower and we had to either find the towers or get back to our gear before dark. Above us was what looked like a path up the cliff and we quickly got dressed and scrambled up. This path went directly into the trees and after a few minutes we saw that we had bypassed the open area and were already deep in the woods. Ahead of us we could see more collapsed barracks and a solid structure of some kind.

When we got close to it, it proved to be a tower—about seven stories high, but scarcely reaching above the trees that had grown up around it.

Tribulations

IT WASN'T ALL that easy for me. I knew from the time I woke up in the car at Bean's that Taylor and I would end up in bed sooner or later. But I thought it would just be friendly. When he said he loved me I just thought, "Well, people use words to carry feelings."

Once burned, twice shy. I've always been drawn to spaniels, and ever since Waite I've been terrified I'd wake up some morning and find myself walking around with another little doggie-Dracula hanging around my neck.

So I was in a turmoil there on the sand. Part of me was holding back, complaining that I was throwing my hard-won freedom in the toilet. Another part was telling me not to be stupid, that we could die any minute in this crazy situation anyway and what difference did it make? My body was ignoring the whole argument completely—mindless little glutton that it is. And somewhere inside there was a little person gripping the sides of her seat in terror.

This went on until we found the tower, which brought me back to earth in a hurry. I had never doubted that Taylor was on the right track with this thing, but it just didn't seem real to me until I looked up and saw that ugly square tower looming out of the woods. I had made a major effort to keep the crazier parts of Taylor's world at arm's length, but here was a tower Taylor had gone into when he was out of his body. He'd been here fully enough to distinguish it from another tower that, as far as I was concerned, looked almost exactly like it. The tower was a gate for me, and once I went through it I'd be forced to accept as cold reality a whole lot of things that up to now had only been fascinating hypotheses.

So I'll confess to a momentary feeling of relief when we discovered that this "gate" had no door. There were steps leading up to it, but only a blank wall where the door should have been. We walked all around it, but there was nothing. No opening at all except for the windows in each of the higher floors.

"We'll have to climb in one of those," I said a little nervously. The first window was about fourteen feet up.

Without a word we both headed for one of the collapsed barracks. Taylor's never been real gifted in the spatial relations department, and his idea was that we'd pile a lot of stuff under the window and climb up on it. The fact that all the "stuff" consisted of flat boards full of rusty nails didn't make much impression on him. I had visions of a huge pile of loose debris sliding apart under our weight, leaving us clear winners in the Saint Sebastian look-alike contest.

What *I* kept thinking about, as we picked through the rubble, was making a ladder. A couple of studs or beams the right length, and we could use anything at all for rungs, providing it had nails. The problem was that most of the rubble was just that. Anything substantial was likely to be still in place. After a long search we finally came up with a couple of two-by-fours, one almost a foot longer than the other. The longer one had boards attached that we could make into rungs, since they had free nails that could be hammered into the other two-by-four. This gave us half a ladder and we were quite elated, thinking it would be an easy matter to find five or six more "rungs." But it wasn't. Most of the nails were bent or rusted away, and on the rare occasions when we found two in the same board they were usually too far apart.

The final product was so ramshackle we both collapsed in laughter at the sight of it. Six-inch boards alternated with one-inch laths, and they were different lengths as well—some of the "rungs" sticking out several feet on either side. It looked like a Norman Rockwell rendering of a clubhouse built by eight-year-olds.

We now had to dig a small hole for the longer side of the ladder so that it would rest evenly on the tower wall. This took time, given the rocky soil, and the sun was close to setting by the time we had the ladder in place. Taylor swarmed up, trying to put as little weight on the weak rungs as possible, but one broke anyway. The top rung, which we'd made sure was a strong one, was about a yard below the bottom of the window, so it wasn't hard for him to hoist himself up and through. I followed a little more cautiously, since no one was holding the ladder and I had a missing rung to contend with. By the time I had negotiated that four-foot gap in the ladder the whole thing had started to tilt, and as I hauled myself into the window the ladder slid serenely on its side. I realized with dismay that if Taylor was wrong about the tunnels we'd have no way of getting out. I'd have to wait like Rapunzel until my hair grew long enough for him to climb down and put the ladder up again. Or we'd have to jump and smash our brains out against the side of the concrete steps. My anxiety wasn't at all relieved when Taylor, who had dashed down the stairs before I was even halfway up the ladder (so much for love), came slowly back up, looking puzzled and frightened.

"Let's go up to the top," he said uneasily.

"You're going to look for tunnels at the top?"

"I want to retrace my . . . path. I want to make sure."

"That it's the right one? Shit, Taylor, it's a little late!"

But he was already racing up the steps. I kicked myself a few times for letting myself be lulled into giving up so much control over my life, and followed him.

The tower had windows on every floor, and on the top floor there was an opening at eye level that went around all four sides. Through the treetops we could see the other tower, a little to the east, and the bay all around. What we couldn't see was any of the shoreline, which is why the tower itself couldn't be seen from the beach. I looked over at the other tower. It wasn't as high as this one, but it had a similar opening at the top. There was something black and modern-looking

inside, but I couldn't tell what it was.

"No, this is the one all right," Taylor said. "I'm positive. Let's go down again."

"The tunnel's not there, I take it." I had superstitiously avoided saying it as long as possible.

"Wait a minute, I'm trying to visualize where it was."

"Please don't let me stop you," I said a little caustically as we rattled down the six flights of steps. I noticed on the way down that a few of the steps were newer than the others.

At the bottom there was nothing. A concrete floor. We could see that what had been a door at one time was now cemented over.

"It was here, underneath the steps. A round opening about two feet in diameter."

Several crushing comments were bubbling to my lips when a thought happily intervened. Why cement over a door if it doesn't go anywhere? The tower was in good condition and someone was maintaining the steps. Why not just lock it? And why replace steps in a tower that no one could get into? I looked at the bottom flight. There was a new one there, too. Conceivably someone using the tower could drag a fifteen-foot ladder along every time they wanted to go up into it, but why would they bother fixing steps *below* the second story?

"It has to be here!" Taylor said, slapping the side of the wooden steps. "But there's not even a trapdoor!"

We got down on our hands and knees and crawled around with our flashlights, but the floor was seamless except for a straight crack under the steps.

"Look along the wall," I suggested. And sure enough, where the wall met the floor there was a space—a space that extended precisely to the crack across the floor. "Maybe it slides back in some way."

We started searching for a button or some other kind of control. We pressed every inch of wall and floor; but nothing happened. We even checked all over the second floor, thinking Sneath might have put the control there to avoid having to stand and wait for the panel to open. This led to another unpleasant thought: What if he used a remote control that he carried with him?

We went down to the first floor again, beginning to confront the

possibility that we would be spending the night—without our sleeping bags or warm clothes.

"We should have gone back to the landing place for our things before coming up that ladder," I said ruefully. "Then we could have made a rope out of our clothes."

"I know this stupid thing opens!" He stamped on it with desperate irritation. "Open Sesame, damn you!"

We both laughed. Then we jumped. And then we laughed again. Because the panel was slowly sliding back to reveal a circular manhole that opened down into utter blackness. Our flashlights picked out an iron ladder and the floors and walls of a large tunnel.

"Bingo!" Taylor said happily, starting to climb down.

"Not so fast! Do you know where you're going?"

"I think so. It looks right."

I followed him down the ladder. The tunnel smelled damp and oily and couldn't be called inviting by any stretch of the imagination, but we felt relieved not to be trapped anymore.

We went north about fifty yards, where a smaller tunnel branched off to the east. Taylor was leading the way and I could see he was concentrating hard—trying to remember the path he had taken when out of his body. I looked around a bit. I noticed that the smaller tunnel was slightly newer than the large one. It was also drier and cleaner. I decided that the larger tunnel was part of the original military installation—intended to accommodate squadrons of men moving from one facility to another. Sneath had simply used whichever existing tunnels served his purpose and built new ones where needed.

After thirty yards or so in the smaller tunnel, we came to another large one, on our right, which Taylor ignored. I began to see a simple pattern in his choices: The tunnels had many branchings, but Taylor always chose the smaller. After several such choices we were in a tunnel so narrow that we couldn't walk abreast. But Taylor seemed completely sure of himself, even when the last tunnel ended in what looked like a blank wall.

"What now?" I asked him.

He just pounded feverishly on the wall.

Almost immediately it swung open, revealing a blinding light and

the tall, elegant form of Delbert Sneath, his thin, sandy eyebrows raised in inquiry and a smirk twinkling around his aquiline nose. He was dressed in a long, dun-colored caftan.

"You should have come to the front door," he said, waving us in. "It's ever so much easier."

Revelations

ONE THING THAT'S different when you're out of your body: The fact that you can go through walls and other solid obstacles means that you don't always "see" them. After all, we mostly see what we need to and ignore the rest, which makes us distort things a lot in everyday life. I didn't "see" the slab over the manhole, and I never once "saw" Sneath's house as it appeared in three-dimensional reality.

The room Sneath ushered us into was a kind of library. All four walls were lined with bookshelves except for the door we came through and another one opposite. Most of the books looked really old, and I didn't recognize a single title.

"I have all this in the computer, of course," he said, following my

glance, "but there's something so romantic about books, I can't quite give them up. You're just in time for dinner."

"What are you serving," Grace asked, "Pentothal Provençale?"

He snickered. "I do owe you an apology. But you see, I didn't know you then."

"And you know us now?"

"Actually I have quite a good idea of you. A rich picture, you might say." A little giggle slipped its collar and scampered across the room. "I've followed your adventures with so much interest!"

He ushered us through the library, into a corridor, to the door of a very small room with windows on one side. It was just large enough to hold a dark, intricately carved, antique table with four Gothic-style high-back chairs. The table was set for three. There were three different wineglasses at each place and a whole lot of silver. I was a little bit impressed, in spite of myself.

"You've planned a hearty meal for the condemned, I see," Grace said, gesturing toward the table. "Which wine will have the knock-out drops? Are you saving it for the champagne again?"

Sneath tittered. "You *are* unforgiving, aren't you? But I promise you a fine meal with no ill effects. Unless, of course, you overindulge. But at your age you don't have to worry about such things, do you! Come, come, you've just time enough to clean up and change. I'll show you to the guest room."

He led us past the dining room and down the corridor, which was really another tunnel but softly lit and decorated with what looked like medieval tapestries, except that they were in much too good condition and had some very peculiar scenes on them: orgiastic, in a Boschian sort of way, and full of odd objects that seemed to be symbols of some kind. We passed a half dozen more doors—most of them, like the little dining room, on the right—before we reached the guest room. In spite of having no windows it was quite pretty, with a large canopy bed in blues and purples and a private bath. There was nothing in the room that was modern or trivial, and I kept wondering how Sneath had managed to get all these things onto the island. There were two pieces of art in the room: a Cocteau drawing and what I realized with a shock was an original Poussin. I was

admiring it when Grace tapped me on the shoulder and pointed to a stand in the corner. On it were our two bags.

"The old pervert's probably been watching us all afternoon. That's probably what he meant by a 'rich picture.' I hope he had a good time."

"I don't begrudge it."

She smiled and kissed me. "I don't either. I don't even care what happens, I'm so grateful not to be sleeping in that tower. *Speaking* of which," she said bitterly, "he might have spared us all that!"

I mollified her by turning on the shower.

We each had a change of clothes in our bags, but when we came out of the shower we noticed two caftans laid out on the bed.

"You don't think he's planning something kinky?" Grace asked.

I shook my head.

"Maybe he thinks we're from Marin," she ventured.

"He always wears one. When he's here, I mean."

We put them on and paraded around the room. Grace draped herself on the bed, and I practiced stage turns. They were all cotton and deliciously comfortable, endowing every movement and gesture with a certain dignity and wholeness.

Our party was interrupted by a dull, heavy knock, and a bulky form appeared in the doorway. It was Bill. I suddenly lost all pleasure in the proceedings. Grace was startled to see him but recovered and smiled.

"Hello, Bill."

"Hullo. Dinner's ready."

"Okay. We'll be right there."

"No. Follow me."

She shrugged and jumped down. It was easier for her to be friendly—she hadn't watched him strangle our neighbors.

Bill led us back to the dining room, pointed for us to go in, and then lumbered off down the corridor. Sneath was already seated.

"I had William bring your bags," he said. "I hope you don't mind. I thought you might want something from them. But I left your sleeping bags—you won't be needing them."

"Are those real windows?"

"Do you want to see?" He excused himself and turned out the lights. "A necessary precaution, I'm afraid."

He then pulled the drapes aside and we were just able to make out a starry sky and a few lights across the water. The window itself was a large rectangular pane of glass on the inside, but an irregular shape of some kind defined it from without.

"The opening is simply cut into the rock," Sneath explained. "Hence the odd shape. A rectangle would be too conspicuous."

He pulled the drapes shut again but didn't turn on the lights. A moment later Bill reappeared with two candelabra.

"After the last time you entertained us I think I want more light on my food," Grace complained.

"My goodness, I give you my word! And I'll not only explain about last time, I'll tell you a great many things you don't know."

That was all Grace was really after, but she still maintained a skeptical façade. Grace is a born haggler and you never know you've met her price until you've gone well past it.

"Think about it this way," Sneath went on. "I don't like to spoil a good meal with unpleasant images, but you know I don't *need* to do anything to you here. I was in a hurry last time. But here I have everything at hand. Should I wish to dispose of you two, I could do it in a million ways. I could have Muller shoot you with a tranquilizer and dump you in the ocean with your boat overturned. A most unfortunate boating accident. One of many. Or I could have William apply that grotesque thumb of his to various pressure points. Really, need I go on? Death is always with us, is it not? Meanwhile there's no point in starving."

"So Muller *does* work for you."

"Yes indeed. An excellent man of unparalleled efficiency. We've been together for five years now. But let's not talk shop right away. I have some lovely appetizers for you."

And so he did, from around the world: spanikopita, *pakoras, ma uon,* pâtés, quail egg flowers, stuffed mushrooms, beef balls in peanut sauce. And six courses after that. Each course was small enough to leave you hungry for the next. It was a polyglot cuisine—Mediterranean, Parisian, Indian, Southeast Asian, African—each

modified in some subtle way to create an integrated whole. Sneath was obviously a man more interested in sensation than satiety.

Grace looked around the room and at the food and smiled.

"The most exclusive dining room."

Sneath raised his eyebrows. Neither of us had any idea what she was talking about.

"I dreamed about this room. About a week after you sandbagged us in that trailer of yours. In my dream the answer to the mystery was here."

"Sometimes in our dream travel we make little experimental forays into the future. People who record their dreams say as many as a third of them are precognitive. But, of course," he added, twinkling over his wine, "you never recognize them for what they are until you look back afterward. We hide the knowledge from ourselves! What fun would life be, after all, if we knew the future? So we prepare the body without letting our minds in on the secret!"

He chuckled into his truffle pâté, vastly pleased with himself. But Grace was not diverted.

"Why *did* you?"

"Mm?"

"Sandbag us. At that stage of the game we had no idea what we were getting into. Couldn't you tell how harmless we were?"

Sneath broke into an explosive falsetto titter, covering his mouth to keep from spraying crumbs all over the table. "My dear, harmlessness is rarely a prolonged illness."

"But how did you even know who we were?"

"Ah, but I didn't. That is, I didn't know anything whatever about *you*. I knew Taylor here because he'd come to visit me."

I had a sinking feeling that I'd done something outlandish when I'd flipped out, and had forgotten it completely.

"It was almost a year ago. You were out of your body but completely unaware of the fact. You came flying up to me in great perturbation, waving your arms and shouting. You told me I was going about it the wrong way and I'd better stop or you'd never sell me any palm wine again and I'd have to go all the way to the next village—some African-sounding place—to get it. And you called me

by a strange name. I don't mind telling you I was quite shaken up. And you came back! Three or four times, in fact, before I finally got the courage up to come visit you and see what all the fuss was about."

"What *was* it about?"

"Well, I don't know, because by that time you were ready to leave the hospital, and you stopped coming. I suppose it was some episode from another lifetime. I don't keep up with that sort of thing myself. Quite enough to do keeping track of this one, wouldn't you agree? You probably just got them mixed up. People do when they go crazy. That's what being crazy is, really: losing the boundary between one plane of reality and another. You start dredging up old grievances. . . . Anyway, I don't like surprises in my work so I decided to keep an eye on you. And the best way to do that was to recruit you."

"Through Louise?" Grace asked. We were both dreading the answer.

"Through Louise. I see that bothers you."

"You're pretty casual about killing people. *That* bothers me," Grace said emphatically. "We weren't overjoyed to find out we were working for someone who puts garage-sale prices on human life."

"Oh, piffle!" Sneath said derisively. "Surely you're not going to go all liberal and pious on me at this early stage of our acquaintanceship! I place precisely the same value on human life as any other good American: In the abstract we think it's wonderful and priceless, but if it stands in the way of making a dollar or two—"

"You're rationalizing," I objected. "Most Americans are very reluctant to kill. At least to kill other Americans."

"Nonsense. Ah! Here it is." Bill was serving the soup. "I think you'll like this. It's quite unusual. A Kashmiri mulligatawny, if you will, with Mediterranean overtones."

"Who does the cooking?"

"Why, I do, mostly. Bill helps, of course. Muller is useless in a kitchen. He eats twice as much as he prepares. But, to continue: Suppose a corporation manufactures a chemical or drug or some substance like asbestos that is found to be lethal to workers or con-

sumers. Do they say, "Oh dear me, let's get this off the market right away before more people die?" Of course they don't. They hire lobbyists and lawyers and publicists and fight tooth and nail to keep on selling it. And even the government agrees that it should be gradually phased out so as not to put too great a financial burden on the corporation that perpetrated this dastardly deed in the first place. And they both do this knowing perfectly well that it will cost the lives of thousands of people, many of them children. And they do this for the sake of the stockholders. And for a majority of these stockholders the amount of money they will make from the deaths of these small children—from asbestos or lead poisoning or whatever—will amount to no more than a few dollars a year. So that's what your precious human life is worth to the average American. I, on the other hand, would never kill anyone for money or, as they do in the Soviet Union, to curry favor with a superior or silence opposition—"

"But wait a minute," Grace interrupted. "You're talking about killing that goes on at a great distance. Anybody can kill if they never have to see it."

"Precisely! And I'm no different." He smiled conspiratorially. "I always have Muller take care of that sort of thing. It doesn't seem to bother him at all." He shuddered, then straightened up. "But mind you, I never take a life unless I feel that the fate of the species as a whole demands it."

"I don't mean to be nasty in the face of such divine hospitality—especially this soup. . . ."

Sneath inclined his head politely. "I'm glad you take pleasure in it. And please, if I thought my modest culinary efforts would in any way mute or blunt honest confrontation between us I should never forgive myself! After all, I do owe you some reparation."

"That's true," Grace agreed implacably. "You do. What I have to ask you is on what gounds you arrogate to yourself the right to judge what's good for the species?"

"Ah, an excellent question. But to answer it I have to go back to the beginning. It's rather a long story and I hesitate to bore you with it."

"We've been waiting all summer to hear it," Grace reminded him.

He refilled our glasses and then curled himself up in his chair, his feet tucked under him and one arm wrapped around the high back. I'm trying not to say "like a spider," but it was. And then, as we munched and sipped our way through the next two hours, he told his story.

Sneath's Story

"WHAT DO YOU know about alchemy?" he began, and when we both shrugged vaguely he smiled. "I suppose you think of it as some kind of medieval mumbo jumbo—some primitive pseudo-science, with crazy old men trying to turn lead into gold and all that sort of thing. That's because it was secret. When people of no imagination try to fathom the motives of superior beings, all they ever come up with is money. But no alchemist was ever rich in the material sense. No one went through all those years of discipline and training just to fill a chest up with coins—something one could do much more easily as a merchant. Every alchemist, even the rankest novice, knew that the goal of alchemy was not to transmute metal but to transform oneself. And no one can do that while remaining attached to material things."

"You don't seem uncomfortable here," Grace slipped in softly.

"I've lived just as happily in hovels, my dear, eating out of garbage cans. It's not that I don't enjoy this. I do. But when I leave here tomorrow I shall never come back, and even though it took me years to build and furnish, I won't spend a single moment missing the place. Anymore than you'd cry over a faded flower.

"But of course every religious discipline teaches that. Non-attachment. Alchemy is special for one reason only. Other disciplines tell you to ignore the material world, that it is sin or maya or illusion, and that salvation lies in freeing oneself from it and ascending to a higher plane. But alchemists ask: 'Why bother to be incarnated at all, if one is to spend one's entire life trying to escape from it?' The simplest way to achieve the spiritual plane, after all, is to die.

"We say, in effect, 'Look, we're here, mucking about in all this *matter*. It may not be a very exalted medium, but *it's the one we're in!* Instead of fleeing, why not use our enlightenment to brighten the material world itself?' Thus we have become, in a sense, the spiritual guardians of matter.

"Of course, this is a very dangerous and ambitious path to take. Matter is a stubborn and seductive medium. Some alchemists became so entranced with it that they lost their way altogether. Instead of transfiguring matter with their transcendent vision, they lost that vision and became blind materialists. This was the birth of what we know as modern science. You see it as a milestone of progress. We see it simply as a group of failed alchemists training others to share their molelike worship of matter. It was like a metastasizing cancer. We saw where it would lead, of course. We tried to warn people. To become seduced by matter is to become dead. Life is an affair of the spirit: When we say people are lively or full of life, we mean they have a lot of spirit—they're not dragged down by matter. As they get older most people *lose* spirit. Their spiritual veins become arteriosclerotic: The spirit can't move—it's trapped. The body overwhelms it, weighs it down; life becomes nothing but food and drink and money and possessions—until the spirit, crushed, surrenders and flees the body forever."

"Then at least one myth about the alchemists is true," Grace said. "They were pursuing immortality."

"Not at all! That would be like trying to run an eternal marathon.

What would be the point? Who would want to stay embedded in matter forever? You've been out of your body—in dreams, if not with full consciousness—so you know the glorious freedom that comes with casting it off even for a few moments.

"Matter for us is simply a burden, a responsibility. We pick it up cheerfully and put it down thankfully. We don't worship it or attach importance to it, but we don't flee from it either.

"We are able to do all the 'miraculous' things we do because we're not imprisoned in materialistic assumptions, which insist that a thing cannot be *A* and *not-A* at the same time. We hav unusual powers because we know that nothing is truly separate from anything else."

"You just lost me," I said.

He wriggled in his chair, happy to have a chance to rephrase what was obviously one of his favorite concepts.

"The universe, the cosmos, everything that exists—matter, spirit, the 'real,' the imagined—is one living, vibrating organism. Some people would call it God. Most humans, being blind, see it as all kinds of little separate particles: 'This is me, that's you, this is a tree, that's a table,' and so on. Just as an ignorant person might see all these islands scattered about us here as separate, when actually they're merely projections from the sea bottom—all part of the earth, all joined together, all one.

"When you understand this wholeness, you can affect it in ways that for most people would seem supernatural. But there's no great trick to it. It's like your hand. If you believed that your fingers, like the islands, were utterly separate, you wouldn't be able to move them! Once you grasp their unity in your mind, you can grasp the material world with that hand. And by the same token the alchemist, seeing that all things, including himself, are a part of one whole, knows there's nothing miraculous about moving matter with his spirit. Given the proper training, he can perform these so-called miracles as easily as he does this." He waggled his fingers in front of his face, his eyebrows making unconscious little arpeggios to underscore his point.

"Then why did the alchemists die out? Why didn't they thrive? Why don't they rule the world?" I asked.

"Ah, you see? You're still thinking in materialistic terms: Wealth!

Power! Control! Push people about! Bend them to your will! But there's no joy in this! People only do it because they're psychic cripples and can't get pleasure any other way!"

"But I don't mean just that," I persisted. "You said the material world was a responsibility. Why couldn't they use their power to make the world a better place?"

Sneath shook his head sadly. "Unity works both ways. We are a tiny fragment of humanity. We move it, but it moves us, too. Our power is dependent on the power and consciousness of all humanity. They wax and wane together. When some of the alchemists became infatuated with matter a wave of ignorance was touched off that is still growing. *You* don't see it as ignorance, because there's a huge accumulation of bits of knowledge. *We* see it as ignorance because the more people know about the parts of matter the less they apprehend the whole. And therefore the less they understand themselves and their relation to the whole. This reduces our own power, since we are part of that same whole, which has become less conscious, more ignorant, more blind."

He struggled for an illustration, pulling his skinny legs up until he was squatting on his chair like an elegant gargoyle, his sharp chin resting on his knees, his long arms embracing his shins. He was amazingly supple—almost childlike—for a man his age.

"Think of it this way. Humanity is like an organism with cerebral palsy. Since it has a defective sense of its own unity, it cannot easily be moved in a coherent way. Its power to move has degenerated.

"At one time there were several hundred living alchemists. Today there are only a dozen. Most of them see themselves as conducting a holding operation. They try to preserve our knowledge and pass it on in the hope that a better day will come, a better soil in which these seeds can grow and flourish once again. Their entire existence is devoted to finding talented disciples and reproducing themselves.

"I'm not content with that. I won't say it isn't an important function, but I didn't come all this way just to run a psychic sperm bank." He smirked a little. "They disapprove of me, you see, because I have no disciple. But it's just a division of labor. *They* want to transmit the seeds; *I* want to see that there's a world left for them to grow in."

"Why do you care?" Grace asked suddenly. "If the world is destroyed, everyone will be liberated from matter. If you don't worship

matter, why should you care? Is it because you'll lose your function? Are you just fighting change, like a factory worker made obsolete by technological innovation?"

Sneath snickered delightedly. "But you see matter would still be there. The 'world' won't be destroyed. This is just a *façon de parler*. When we say 'the world will end,' we mean *us*. It's just collective narcissism. The higher forms of life will be annihilated, but life itself will go on.

"No, the reason I care is that human beings are very interesting. It's not a very *good* species, to be sure. It doesn't adapt well to other forms of life, and the individual members are much too selfish to ensure the welfare of the species itself. They're awkward, clumsy, stupid, and, unlike any other species, mean, uncontrolled, and sadistic."

"Then why bother?"

"As I said, they're *interesting*. Full of drama, excitement. After all, how many good stories can you get out of an antelope? Come now, your question is unanswerable, and you're smart enough to know it! There's no *reason* to do anything. People invent them, of course: reasons to get up, to stay in bed, to live, to die, to be generous, to be selfish—but it's all the most specious nonsense! Anyone with an ounce of brains can pick all those 'reasons' to pieces in five seconds, simply by asking, 'And why is *that* important?' And, of course, ultimately there's no answer except, 'Well it's important to *me,* I *want* it, I have this *belief* about it.' So there it is. I'm a human, I'm fascinated by our species, disgusting as it is, and I want it to survive. I haven't the remotest idea why, but I've devoted my life to it. After all, if you're going to be alive you ought to be willing to throw yourself into the game without asking a lot of stupid questions! 'Why paint, Mr. Vermeer? Don't you know God can do it better?' Why make millions? You can't eat it or drink it or make love to it. Why try to win the World Series? It's only a game! But, you see, that's the whole point! It's a game! Whatever you do that isn't just surviving is a game! So this is mine. Saving humanity when it desperately wants to die. Silly, isn't it? But fun, in its own way, just because it *is* so difficult. Alchemists gave up easy games long ago."

"And how do you plan to do it? And how did we get involved in it?" Grace wanted to know.

"I have to backtrack a bit. You see, alchemists have a special relationship to what you call 'atomic energy,' and a special responsibility. We understood a thousand years ago that matter is energy. After all, that was our domain. We weren't really interested in the applications of matter—how to make this or that out of it—we were interested in what it *was:* how it related to *spirit.* So we were always interested in how all the many forms of matter reduced to the same thing. Of *course* we knew that lead could be changed into gold—it was just a question of altering the molecular structure. We never *did* it, we just used it as an example to capture the attention of students. Unfortunately it was too good an example—most of them never heard anything else.

"The point is, we were nervous about scientists getting involved in atomic energy and warned them repeatedly what would happen if they kept fiddling about with it. But naturally they ignored us—they didn't really know who we were or respect our understanding. You know the rest.

"So when I was quite young I decided to put my knowledge to political use—much to the dismay of my colleagues and my teacher. I became an intelligence officer, working my way up the ladder with considerable speed by employing the special gifts of my order. At the same time I contacted Soviet intelligence and began building a reputation as a double agent. From the Soviet viewpoint I'm their most highly placed mole. From the American viewpoint I'm one of the highest career officers in our most effective covert intelligence organization. I've been suspected a few times by one side or the other, but since I always pretty much know what they're thinking, I've always been able to divert the suspicion elsewhere. After all, I personally sit in on all their highest-level intelligence meetings. As a little live bug on the wall, of course."

Sneath paused and unwound himself to nibble a bit of pheasant and lubricate his larynx.

"As the cold war progressed I realized more and more that the leaders of the two countries—blinded by the neurotic power hunger that had raised them to their positions of prominence—were on an inevitable collision course. They had the mentality of kamikaze pilots. The ordinary people were a bit saner but had only a kind of abstract idea of the danger they were in. Only a real-life exposure to

the catastrophic nature of the event itself, on a small scale, would bring them to a true appreciation of it."

Grace and I both stopped eating at the same moment, and simultaneously took a seriously unrefined gulp of wine.

"Well, I know it sounds horrendous, but people are incorrigibly pigheaded. You can show them films and quote statistics and all that, and they'll still go right on doing the same thing. People are so lazy! They'll do and say almost anything to keep from having to make that godawful wrenching adjustment to new behavior! They say the most arrant nonsense! Things like: 'I know it will end human life forever, but we've got to stop them, you know!' As if it were self-evident. Do you know why the captain goes down with his ship? It isn't tradition or gallantry or any of that bunkum—it's just inertia! He likes being on the bridge and can't bear to think of having to lose his dignity climbing into a lifeboat on an equal footing with everybody else.

"Catch one of those ambitious men who's rushing about and exhausting himself doing all kinds of stupid, destructive, and immoral things, and ask him why he doesn't stop, since he complains so much about it. He'll give you the most idiotic reasons! He needs the money, his family would suffer, patriotism, the future—there's no imaginable folly the silly twit won't pull out of his hat to justify his inertia, his unwillingness to change. Sometimes not even a heart attack will do it! Now I ask you, are we dealing with an easily educable mind here? It will take a powerful knock on the head to make him see reason!"

He munched a bit of salad.

"What I'm talking about is a kind of nonfatal heart attack for the human species. When I say nonfatal, of course, I mean for the species as a whole. A heart attack kills off millions of individual cells, and a controlled nuclear accident would kill millions of individual humans. But it might well bring the rest to their senses."

We both stared at him.

"Yes, I know, I know. It's ghastly, monstrous, inhuman, and diabolical, and I'm another Hitler for even thinking of it. But ask yourselves, coldly and honestly, do you think all the speeches and films and laws and protests and marches in the world are going to stop those people from blowing each other up? They're trained to do it, you see; it's all they know! Knee-jerk competitiveness! Whatever

you say to them, they'll say, 'Well, I understand your concern, but it's one of those security things. We *have* to do it this way.' They're too rigid to change. And the ordinary people back down. They're intimidated. But what if they had a ten-thousand-square-mile wasteland to point to—where there used to be cities and industries and colleges and churches and hospitals and millions upon millions of people—where nothing could live for hundreds of years because of the contamination? *That* would make an impression! The danger would no longer be abstract. The leaders could no longer capitalize on the public's lack of imagination.

"Please realize that I didn't arrive at this conclusion easily or comfortably. I'm quite alive to the horror of it. But I don't shrink from responsibility—"

"You don't shrink from playing God, either," Grace interrupted.

He snorted. "Playing God? You play God every time you weed a garden! Or breed animals! Playing God! It's humanity's favorite game! People just don't like being on the receiving end! As if a lovely field of vetch were less precious in the eyes of God than some nasty young miser!" He tittered. "All right! Fair enough! I'm guilty! Or rather I'm deficient in the kind of chronic pusillanimous morality that prevents people from taking outrageous but necessary actions. A properly guilt-ridden intellectual liberal would simply snuffle blindly along the ground and let humanity destroy itself utterly, feeling all the while extremely ethical and thoughtful and noble in his self-satisfied sloth! He would see himself as an unsung urban hero for passively murdering the entire human race and condemn me as the worst murderer of all time for actively saving ninety-nine percent of it!" He sneered contemptuously, the only time I ever saw him lose his good humor. Then he recovered and smiled again.

"Look, I know what you're thinking, because I've thought it all myself: 'How can you do this? How can you set yourself up as a judge, deciding who will live and who will die?' But my plan requires the collusion, witting or unwitting, of hundreds of other people and a variety of forces not under my control. I am one little person with an unpleasant remedy in my hand. I'm not so grandiose as to imagine that I am doing it all myself. The rest of the world will have to cooperate."

He swallowed some wine and jabbed a playful finger at us.

"You're afraid of death. You see too little of it. All this modern nonsense of trying to keep everything alive is sheer egoism! Life *includes* death, *requires* it in fact! Death revivifies life: Decay fertilizes new growth. Without death there can be no birth, and without birth matter cannot be reinvigorated with fresh spirituality. Trying to *stop* death is what deadens people; it imprisons them in matter, and they become stiff and encrusted with fibrous tissue. It's the rankest kind of materialism, all this concern with the . . . the 'sanctity of life' and . . . keeping the comatose alive and . . . 'how to live longer' and . . . and the 'right to life' and . . . cryogenics. . . . Why!" He looked shocked. "These people obviously don't believe in an afterlife!"

I drank a little wine, trying to gather my thoughts in the face of this onslaught. But Sneath was just warming up.

"Death is the only remedy for deadness, and our modern world is filled with the living dead. Our great technological society is a huge web of interlocking deadness woven by the fear of death—by clinging to matter. It's all around you. It invades you every day and absorbs your life like a sponge, sucking it up blindly. Everyone tries to avoid Death as he makes his rounds, by playing dead: 'Don't touch *me,* I'm already gone!' People just stumble around and around this web of deadness, going through the motions of life but wearing the mask of death. Around and around, more dead every day, until gradually they become web material themselves, closing in and deadening others.

"A few people attempt flight—try to get outside the web, back to nature, or into the world of the spirit. Only an alchemist can tread the web of deadness and stay fully alive. Like a hermit crab, I use the web but it isn't mine. A hermit spider, you might say. It took centuries of stupidity and greed to build this web, and I'm the only man alive who knows how to manipulate it without just piling up more deadness. I'm not boasting—just recounting a sad truth. All I'm doing is applying a thousand years of learning to the task of teaching the human race the lesson of its life."

I was struggling to keep together what I wanted to say.

"I understand everything you've said—"

"But your approach all depends on a whole lot of estimates!"

Grace interjected. "So it has no more validity than all those statistics that necro scientists invent when they want to do something dangerous."

"But I haven't thrown any figures at you. I've only asked you to adopt one premise, which you can accept or reject on the basis of your own experience."

"Wait a minute, that's not *my* point," I objected. "You said there's really no *reason* to do anything—that we act from personal whims and rationalize them as best we can. But you want *us* to accept the game *you're* playing. Maybe even join in. I can understand how you arrived at what you want to do, but I'm just against it. I have no reason, just like you. I'm just emotionally unwilling to have millions of people killed until every other path has been explored."

"By which time it may be too late."

"But you have to pit that risk against the risk that it wasn't really *necessary* to kill millions of people before their time," Grace objected. "It's the old dilemma about executing an innocent man versus letting a mass murderer go free."

"And as we argue," Sneath smiled, "time ticks away."

"And you still haven't told us the plan or how we fit into it," Grace answered, acidly.

"You're *so* right!" he snickered. "I keep drifting off the point!" He turned serious again. "Over the years, while performing my official tasks I was also building my own organization. Most of my people were recruited from outside the intelligence community, but they often masqueraded as agents. For work that required psychic abilities of one kind or another I drew upon a network that has existed for about seven hundred years—a network of what I suppose you might call shamans or witches. The unusual thing about them is that none of them are tied very closely to the cultures that created them. It began in northern Europe with the Christian persecution of the various local religions that we ignorantly lump together as 'paganism.' While most of these pagan practitioners simply went on doing what they had always done until they were absorbed or destroyed by the Christians, a small group of particularly gifted and farseeing shamans and healers—I'll call them witch-masters—concerned that the knowledge, teachings, and skills of thousands of years were

about to be lost forever to the irresistible tide of bigotry sweeping over the land, went underground. They began to make astral contact with colleagues in other places and eventually to meet together in the flesh. As the old religions were either co-opted or rooted out by the Church, the number of witch-masters became smaller and smaller, but their knowledge and skill became more and more cosmopolitan and eclectic, since they were forced to range farther and farther afield and share their art with colleagues from ever more diverse traditions and cultures. They were fairly successful in escaping persecution because they had such an extended network, with spies all through the Church hierarchy.

"Like the alchemists, their biggest problem was finding new disciples. As Western materialism spread like a great cancer all over the globe, the pool of potential recruits steadily shrank. They had to devote more and more energy to the problem of reproducing themselves, and to this end they became travelers and explorers—even posing as missionaries in order to find talented shamans in uncorrupted cultures. But it was an arduous task. For every gifted shaman there were a hundred mediocre ones, eking out their paltry skills with the grossest charlatanism. There's always a certain amount of hocus-pocus in any practice—the white coats and colored pills and Latin terminology of Western medicine, for example. But some of these poor devils in remote villages are shamans only by heredity and have no gift whatever. So the witch-masters might hunt for decades without finding a single recruit. Their best results were obtained when the indigenous cultures were already corrupted and decaying. It was easier to get around, and the local shamans were more receptive.

"So the network grew—loose and shapeless but always spreading and strengthening. Techniques were exchanged and skills multiplied: Psychic healing, astral travel, telehypnosis, psychokinesis—what any single culture had perfected was passed on to the others. Yet in each part of the world the groups had their own special identity. In Western Europe they were called 'Hecate's Children.' In Russia, the 'Baba Yaga Brigade.' In North America they were called 'Makluts.' There was no overall structure to it, just a loose confederation." He chuckled to himself, delighted at the recollection. "Like a

saturated solution just waiting for that last little drop!"

"So you took them over," Grace said.

"Oh, no, no, no! How crude! I . . . how do they say it? I 'networked' with them. We've always been in contact over the centuries—the witch-masters and the alchemists—so it was quite a natural alliance. We have many overlapping skills. A great many." He smiled reflectively.

"Then what differentiates you?" I asked.

He waggled a finger at me. "You haven't been listening! The witch-masters aren't devoted to matter the way we are. This gives us certain advantages. In general, you see, those activities you call 'psychic' take place on an open channel. If I want to go somewhere out of my body, I become immediately accessible to anyone else who is in a similar state. And when I say 'accessible' I mean not only in the sense of visibility. I mean, all my thoughts, feelings, attitudes—everything! I become an open book. There are no secrets in the psychic world—that's why nations have had such difficulty finding military applications.

"But alchemists are at all times firmly planted in the material world. That's why our knowledge and skills are so hard-won compared to the witch-masters'. But that same difficulty gives us an advantage: We can carry into the spirit world certain everyday-life abilities. In short, we can protect and disguise ourselves." He turned to me and smiled. "For you, I always wore a spider costume."

"From the beginning?"

He nodded. "When I first went looking for you, you were sitting in your house watching an extremely defective spider. I decided to impersonate it."

"Then it was you who led me to Louise."

"Yes."

"Then why did you bother to stop us on the road?" Grace asked.

"Mind you, I knew nothing about you whatsoever. I had a strong suspicion that Taylor here might be a very talented psychic, although he was untrained and sometimes lost his boundaries." He turned to me. "I wanted you on my team, but I wasn't quite sure what sort of bird you were. I was sending you to a powerful Maklut for training, and I was a little nervous about what the outcome would be. I

wanted to do some tests to see how gifted you were and get some indication of your frame of mind."

"Did you?"

"Ah, well, it wasn't as clear as I would have liked. You've turned out to have more ability than I thought at that time, and Louise and I found it advisable to keep you near at hand."

"Was that missile fiasco all your doing?"

"For the most part. I had just started to set up my plan when I found out about Project Joshua, which would have made things extremely difficult to control. I needed to nip Joshua in the bud before it created a disaster far more extensive and convincing than my own! So you see, I'm not nearly as callous as you think."

"So you knew all about Louise's Gormanizers?"

"Is that what she calls them? How unpoetic!" He smiled condescendingly. "Not at first. She said she had a device that would stop them if I could find a way to set off no more than two of them. I already knew about the rock band because some of my own American agents were working on the case. So we worked out the plan between us."

"Who captured us?"

"Let's just say it was a competing agency. They were a little more on top of things than I'd anticipated. They captured two of Louise's colleagues with their Gormanizers and were hot on your trail. I made a deal with Louise that I would rescue all of you *and* her Gormanizers if I could keep them. That's why she was in such a hurry to get yours back before you were captured with them. But she missed, and they got you and I got them. I got the other two Gormanizers, too, but the two Makluts were killed in the fracas. It was an expensive deal for Louise, I'm afraid. For our competitors, too. They lost fifteen agents and several files.

"Meanwhile Wyatt Earp was heating up, which seemed like an even greater threat. And since you were developing so quickly we decided to use you to help gather information. Things were happening so fast we needed constant surveillance to determine their timetable, and I could only be there every now and then. I have to keep an eye on Russian lunatics, too, you see. And, to be perfectly frank, I needed to keep an eye on you, as well. You learned much too

quickly." He snickered and stuck a fork into his last bit of pastry.

"Is that why you had Pat and Jack spy on us?"

"That was more complicated. I have much less control over my Soviet agents than I do over my American ones. No one trusts their moles completely, and they have little direct authority, by the nature of things. The Soviets got onto you on their own, and I had to insinuate myself into the act, so to speak. I put William in to keep an eye on things, and then fate played nicely into my hands. They had become careless and were on the verge of exposure, which gave me the perfect excuse to have them 'terminated,' as we say in the business."

He leaned back in his chair as Bill brought in coffee and cognac.

"Which brings us up to the present. The day after tomorrow at four P.M., Eastern Standard Time (it will be eleven P.M. in Moscow), a single missile will accidentally be fired from the Soviet Union. This has been part of my plan from the very beginning. The missile is aimed at Boston."

"*Boston!*"

"Yes, Boston. What did you want, Akron? I thought about this a long time. People get quite numb about death statistics, you know, especially if it's far away. They're much more impressed when you destroy property. Knock out an historic old city—the cradle of the Revolution, as it were—with several universities, one of the world's greatest libraries, a few museums with 'deathless' masterpieces, all forever destroyed. . . . I said it would take a great jolt to knock sense into people. Populations, after all, can be replaced, but when culture dies it dies forever. I want people to be impressed with losses that are permanent, irretrievable. Actually, the United States is getting off easy. For at precisely the same moment an American missile is going to be fired, also accidently, toward Kiev—a much, much older city with far more to lose in the way of precious artifacts."

Grace looked like she was going to be sick.

"You're crazy! You're out of your fucking mind!"

Sneath smiled sadly. "I know. I know. It's insane, barbaric, cruel, disgusting. It will be hard to live with myself afterward. But I'm committed to saving the species and you know as well as I do that nothing less will do it."

"I don't know anything of the kind!" Grace said sharply. "Blow up a piece of the desert if you want an accident! All people need to be shown is how easy it would be to *have* an accident!"

"Don't be naïve! Look what happened after Joshua. There was a ruckus, an investigation, the news was full of it for a month, the peace movement gained some converts, a few people were fired, the government claimed that the flaw had been corrected and that the system was now foolproof—which most people were stupid enough to believe—and it all died down. I'm not a bloodthirsty man, my dear. I've been watching public reaction to nuclear dangers very closely for almost forty years. Don't you think that if there were a way to do it more cheaply I would?"

"You don't know until you try," I objected. "You should at least *test* the possibility. Then if nothing else worked—"

"I *have* tested. 'Almost' just doesn't do it. People don't learn from 'almost.' If they have a near miss they're just that much more convinced that God's watching over them. Your average human is a very slow learner, my boy. Look at Hiroshima! It convinced no one, outside of the Japanese. You have to hit people close to home."

"Wait a minute!" Grace broke in. "If these missiles land, there'll be instant retaliation. It'll end up a holocaust anyway!"

Sneath shook his head.

"If either side tries to retaliate they'll find their launch systems temporarily inoperative. But it isn't likely. A few minutes after the missile from Russia is in the air the Soviets will call the president on the hot line. But by that time the president will also have some explaining to do. Both countries will try desperately to shoot down the incoming missiles, but they'll both find their radar is malfunctioning at the only sites where they might have a chance. You must understand, I've been planning this for years: It involves enormous difficulties since the technology keeps changing. And this is the real reason I can't do any 'dry runs.' There just isn't time. I would also run a greater risk of discovery."

"Then why are you telling *us*?"

"You'll be my guests here, under guard, until it's over. Then you'll be free. If you tell anyone what I've told you they'll think you're crazy. If you tell them what you know about Iris they'll also think

you're either crazy or a spy, or a crazy spy, and lock you up in any case. You," he said, turning to Grace, "will lose custody of your daughter. And that's only the beginning. You forget that I am highly placed and have extremely incriminating files on both of you. I could have you picked up at any time and tried for treason. And, of course, there is always Muller if I'm in a hurry. I've told you nothing that identifies me in my official capacity. If I had I wouldn't let you live for even a moment, fond as I am of you. There's too much at stake." He lifted a glass. "But let's not be unpleasant anymore. You've done such good work and we might want to collaborate again one day. Yet another reason for keeping you alive—I hate to waste good talent. A toast?"

Grace was suddenly on her feet. She looked scared and furious. "Toast my daughter's death, you fuck-head?!"

"But your daughter's not in—"

"She's in Truro! What's the difference?!"

"Set your mind at rest, my dear. I'll see she's moved out of danger. Your two friends, too."

"And the other five million people don't matter, right?"

"What about Iris?" I broke in. "What if the president gets nervous and Iris gets triggered?"

"At this moment Wyatt Earp is for all practical purposes no longer operational. I've put what I suppose you'd call a psychic lock on every missile in the system except the one addressed to Kiev. I plan, in fact, to use Iris for my 'accident,' which will completely discredit the project. He'll not only fire accidentally but *mis*fire in every case but one."

"How will you do it? How will you override the inhibition?"

"Well, that's my little secret. I can't tell you everything, can I? But you can imagine it, I'm sure. Suppose we were at a reception and I slipped a drug in his grape juice? Or took him into the men's room and got him drunk? Actually, it's much simpler than that. I could make him believe I'm the president and say the magic words—his mind is very easily manipulated. Or just send him a vivid image of cherry clusters that he couldn't block out. I have the ability to do that, just as I had the ability to make you see a spider."

He smiled pleasantly, but getting no response from us he gave a

sad shrug and stood up. "Well, I see there's no way to keep our evening from ending on a sour note. God knows, I've done my best. I hope you'll be comfortable for the rest of your stay. You can leave Saturday afternoon, as soon as the missiles have landed."

He turned to me. "And as long as we're being uncomfortable with each other—don't try to follow me. The minute you leave your body I'll know it and I'll order William to kill you. Mind you, I'd hate to do it, but I would, of necessity. I know you're very strong, but there's a lot you still don't know. And it really doesn't matter how far you can travel or what you can achieve out of your body if you can't come back. That's why I got you to come here. I wanted to be sure you wouldn't disrupt things, unintentionally or otherwise. Come," he said kindly, "try to look at the long run. It will help. And enjoy the Poussin; it will be a long time before anyone sees it again."

Games

WHEN WE GOT back to our room Taylor and I talked for hours trying to digest all this new information. We looked for loopholes in Sneath's plan, but our ideas were so lame we didn't even bother to lower our voices. Taylor got so frustrated he stormed over to the locked door and started kicking it, yelling and swearing. I was really enjoying it—only because it was Taylor and not some necrophiliac trying to intimidate me—when he stopped abruptly.

"Sing something to me," he said, gesturing wildly.

"What'll you have?"

"Something you know really well."

I sang the Beatles' song "In My Life," which I suppose had some deep meaning, but it was the first thing that came into my head. He kept motioning me to sing louder, and in the middle he started whispering in my ear, which made it hard to concentrate, especially when I realized what he was saying:

"If we're trapped in here for three days the only chance we have of stopping him is for me to go out of my body. He said he'd kill me if I did, but I don't care. The only thing that worries me is that he'll have to kill you, too, and I don't want that. He could be bluffing but still—"

I signaled to him to pick up the song while I whispered my answer:

"There's no way we could go on living without knowing we tried everything we could. So do it. Please."

We got undressed and into bed, too depressed and worried to think about making love. We held each other and talked quietly—wondering whether we'd ever get out, whether Sneath was lying, what the future would be like if we survived. And then we began reminiscing about the past and Las Lunas, even sharing stories of our childhoods. We were talking more and more like people who don't expect to live very long. And suddenly all my reservations and uneasiness and comparisons with Waite just ebbed away, and there wasn't anything or anybody in the world except Taylor. And we started making love, softly and slowly at first.

"Do you think he's watching?" Taylor asked.

"I don't care if he is. I'm glad he knows what he's missing. Eat your heart out, Delbert!"

Hours later a sound woke us up. It was a helicopter, directly overhead. It seemed to hang there for a long time. I tried to imagine where on the island it could be landing, since the only flat places were covered with trees. Before I could decide, it took off again.

"He's gone."

Taylor grunted and rolled over. I lay awake for a while trying to think up a plan, which quickly dissolved into a dream. I slept heavily until morning.

The A.C. woke us up to announce that breakfast would be ready in fifteen minutes, which didn't leave enough time for Taylor to make a trip "out." After breakfast, which was mercifully light, the A.C. brought us to the room again, saying he'd be back in a half hour. Taylor stretched out immediately, and I sat nervously in a chair between the bed and the door in case Sneath made good his threat.

But after about twenty minutes Taylor made a noise and opened his eyes.

"I can't get out."

"Not at all?"

"I mean, I can get *out,* but I can't get away from the island. There's a barrier. It's like a huge jar, and the whole island's inside it. He's created some kind of shield. I can't get through it. I just bounce off it, like glass or something. I went all over the place looking for an opening."

"There has to be some way, or he wouldn't have had to threaten you."

"Maybe he thought I was a lot more 'gifted' than I am. I did manage to do a little exploring, though. I went in all the rooms and tunnels, and all around the outside, too. He's got just about everything here. The smaller tower has a radio transmitter in it, and there's a man who sleeps just below it—he must be on call all the time. Besides him there isn't anyone else on the whole island, except Bill and Muller."

"That's enough."

We didn't think Sneath's threat would be activated unless Taylor actually got through the jar, and that must have been the case because a few minutes later the A.C. opened the door and ushered us out as if nothing had happened. He was carrying a basket.

"You're going outside," he said in his usual chatty way. He led us down a long corridor, through a heavy steel door that led down another tunnel and up into some kind of cellar—a circular stone room that looked like the inside of a castle keep. It had apparently been built into the side of a hill and had some small windows on one side, partially boarded up. Birds had gotten in and built nests all along the beams. The room was full of junk, including three lawn chairs that the A.C. motioned to us to carry up a stairway where he let us out through a bulkhead door into open sunlight. There we found a grassy spot, about twenty-five yards in diameter, surrounded by trees and bushes. It had once been the lawn of a house at the northern end of the island, and Sneath had reclaimed it. To the north we could see the ocean through the trees that had grown up over the years, and behind us the foundation of the house. It felt like a cage, with pine trees for bars.

We set up the three lawn chairs and the A.C. sat in one, put the basket down, and motioned to us to look inside. It contained several trashy novels (apparently the A.C.'s private stock), a Frisbee, a soccer ball, a whiffle ball and bat, and a croquet set. I thought the A.C. made a darling social director, but he didn't seem to enjoy it much. He just sat in his lawn chair and beetled at us, his shambling bulk looking more lubberly than ever in the flimsy chair, with his thick boots hanging over the end and his enormous hands resting on the ground like discarded shovels. But the sun felt good, and I did some stretches and rolls while Taylor sat and looked through the trees at the water.

We soon found out that all this prospective entertainment wasn't just Sneathian hospitality. When Taylor put his head back and closed his eyes the A.C. reacted immediately.

"No sleep," he growled menacingly. "Read."

So read we did. Taylor's novel was about people crazed by money. Even though they *had* lots of money, and everything they did *made* lots of money, they were forever trying to swindle each other out of still more (usually by going to bed with their victims first so they wouldn't notice). Then they'd all get bored with their money and start seducing their chauffeurs and maids and hairdressers for something to do. And then all *those* people would get infected with money-lust, and blackmail their seducers into setting them up in business. Apparently money-lust is a venereal disease like herpes or gonorrhea, because the minute poor people sleep with rich people in these books they all want to start their own businesses. It's no wonder the bankruptcy courts are so busy.

I drew one of those old sci-fi classics where people tear around in spaceships fitted out with jillions of gadgets. The men are all scientists or military officers, and when they get tired of playing with their machines they relax by exchanging incredibly stilted dialogue with a series of vacuous high school prom queens in futuristic disguises, distinguishable only by hair color. I think these books are all written by sexually retarded twelve-year-old boys with basements full of chemistry sets and model airplanes, who look forward to the day when all their needs can be met mechanically without their having to leave their rooms.

Poor Taylor kept falling asleep over his big-bucks novel and the

A.C. would have to yell at him. So after an hour or so we gave up and explored the game possibilities. It took us only ten minutes to lose the Frisbee in the trees, and we had exhausted the entertainment potential of the whiffle ball well before lunchtime. But we learned one thing of value: As long as we were moving, the A.C. ignored us and we could talk freely. Even lowered voices didn't bother him.

We brought up and discarded several plans for evading the A.C.'s supervision. One problem was that we didn't know how to assess his intelligence or lack of it. His stolidity was astonishing: He could sit and stare into space for hours, yet he understood whatever you said and could apparently read and write. He certainly wasn't distractible: From the morning's tentative efforts I was convinced I could strip, do cartwheels around the grass, and levitate, and he'd still catch Taylor if his eyelids so much as drooped.

"Why not just wait till tonight?" I suggested, trying halfheartedly to dribble the soccer ball past him. "He didn't bother us last night."

"Because Sneath wouldn't be *doing* anything at night. What could I do if I went down there and everyone was just sleeping? Anyway what difference does it make, if I can't get out of this jar?" He stole the ball and we changed directions.

"Wasn't there a jar in your first dream about Sneath?"

"A whole series. But they were open at the top. Anyway it was a dream."

"But you were *'out.'* You were *here.* You just weren't fully conscious."

"So?" He kicked the ball into the bushes.

"So there was some kind of psychic barrier then, too, but you got through it."

"There was an opening. A neck and a mouth, like a regular big glass jug."

"So there must be a mouth in this one, too. Look, he created it in your mind. You said it was a jar. If it's a jar it has a mouth. It can have whatever you believe—whatever you want." I fished the ball out.

"Easy for *you* to say."

"You got through before."

"But when am I going to have a chance?"

"We could escape through the woods and head for the boat."

We pretended to trip each other and fell down.

"By the time we fought our way through the brush and down the cliffs he would have either strangled us or called Muller. Are you going to do aikido on him or something?"

"I wouldn't dream of it." I shuddered. "But it's the only chance we have, and once we're in the boat—"

"Come on, Grace! We'd be sitting ducks out there on the water. Muller has high-powered rifles. Plus I saw a boat in the trees with an outboard that would move the *Queen Elizabeth*."

"Then we'll just have to overpower this one before he can sound the alarm."

"Sure. I'll attract his attention while you hit him with the whiffle bat."

"Don't forget what else is in the basket."

"Oh no."

"Why not? We invite him to play a little game with us, then while he's taking a shot one of us bops him with a mallet."

"And the other one strangles him with a wicket, and then we drive the stake through his heart, just to make sure. If I thought he'd feel it, I'd try it. But it's pretty embarrassing to hit someone as hard as you can with a croquet mallet and just have them turn around and glare at you."

"Okay, *you* come up with something."

But he didn't have to, because just then the A.C. heaved himself up out of his fragile-looking chair across the lawn and growled, "Lunch!" and waved us back to the tunnel.

The A.C. definitely had his own ideas about scheduling. Lunch was at one, and even though we ate it in twenty minutes we had to sit around the table until two. In daylight the Gothic-style furniture seemed dull and cold. The little dining room had lost all its romance. I felt as if I was in school again. I wondered if he'd make us take a rest period and put our heads down on the table. Taylor said if we did he could go out of his body, as long as he was lined up on a north-south axis.

But the A.C. apparently decided the next two hours were study period and sentenced us to the library, arriving exactly at two o'clock to usher us down the thirty feet of corridor between the two rooms. We poked around the shelves for a while and thumbed through a

few volumes. There were shelves and shelves of alchemical works, a few books on physics, some anthropology (little that I was familiar with), and a lot of books dealing with various mystical and esoteric traditions. Another time I might have enjoyed exploring, but I was too restless. Muller created a moment's diversion when he stuck his head in to apologize for not having spent more time with us—pleading a heavy workload and promising to join us for dinner.

Fortunately there was a chess board set up and Taylor and I managed to kill another horrible hour playing games of high-speed chess. It was easier than reading but I felt stereotypically decadent playing chess on the eve of a disaster.

At four the A.C. reappeared and led us outside again. But the wind had shifted to the southeast, and although it was still sunny overhead one of those Maine fogs was drifting in and we had to go for sweaters. I don't know what changed his mind—maybe the idea of dinner with Muller—but on the way back Taylor whispered that he was "reconsidering Plan A," which made my stomach jump up and down with a combination of hope and terror. I squeezed his hand in assent.

As soon as we got outside again we set up the croquet game—affecting an air of terminal listlessness—and after we had both taken our first shot asked the A.C. if he wanted to play. He hesitated a moment and then nodded—I suspect because he got to go last.

At first the A.C. was careful, but after a few shots he got caught up in the game, which he was winning. In fact it was all we could do to keep up with him, and we began to worry that we'd never have an opportunity to strike. Taylor and I adopted the strategy of always sticking close enough to hit each other for extra shots. At the center wicket coming home we finally caught up with the A.C.'s ball and I was able to hit it. I made a big production out of deciding whether to take the two shots or knock him away, and he got very engrossed in it. I tried not to look at Taylor coming up behind him—not even to *think* about him or remember he was there. I dramatized my decision making to the point of starting to hit the A.C.'s ball away and then pretending to feel so sorry for him that I couldn't. Then I bent down to move the balls apart, mainly because I didn't want to see Taylor's mallet coming down on the back of his head. When I heard the blow I immediately swung my own mallet back in readi-

ness, but he sank to the ground like a steer in an abattoir—which was fortunate since my mallet head had gone flying off and I was brandishing a bare handle.

I was about to dash for the woods when Taylor stopped me.

"It's foggy—we'll need a compass in the boat. I saw one downstairs."

I glanced at the A.C. Blood was oozing from the side of his head but he was certainly far from dead. Taylor took his keys and was opening the door to the cellar stairs.

"We won't need a compass if we don't *get* to the boat!" I objected.

It was the worst possible time for Taylor to get spacey. We had to go through thick brush, down slippery cliffs, and along a half mile of rocky shore that could be very slow going. The thought of doing it with the A.C. chasing us was unpleasant enough, and I kept wondering when Muller was going to decide that he had deprived us of his hospitality for too long. I had visions of his appearing on the rocks with a machine gun to help Taylor and me brush up our Bonnie and Clyde imitations.

But Taylor was already through the door and down the steps, assuring me he'd be right back—one of the week's many unfulfilled promises. For as I ran over to tell him to hurry for God's sake, I heard the steel door open down the corridor.

I had to make a fast decision. Every bone in my body was screaming to get the fuck out of there, but I couldn't leave Taylor. So I slipped in the door, closing it softly behind me, and crept down into the cellar. Taylor was standing there petrified, not knowing whether to stay or follow me outside. He looked relieved to see me. We just had time to duck down behind a stack of empty crates when Muller came by.

"Bill?" he called out. "Hey, Bill!"

He went up the stairs and opened the bulkhead door. We gave him time to get outside and see the A.C. on the ground. Then we made a dash for it down the corridor. When we got to the steel door we had to try five or six keys before we found the right one, and after each try I hallucinated running footsteps and bullets thudding into my back. I was pushing so hard on Taylor that he could barely find the keyhole, and when he finally got the door unlocked we exploded through it, so relieved that we neglected to keep it from slamming—

which it did with a reverberating metallic boom that I was convinced was registering on a Richter scale somewhere. Muller might have been halfway down the cliffs looking for us, but there was no escaping or mistaking that sound. And if I could imagine anything worse than being pursued by Muller on the rocks it was being pursued by Muller in a tunnel.

The door of our room was still open when we came racing down the corridor, and to my acute horror Taylor stopped and ran in.

"Jesus, Taylor! Jesus! Jesus! Jesus!" I screamed, inarticulately.

He reemerged almost immediately with our flashlights and windbreakers, and although I was pleased at his touching faith in our future, I gave him a frantic yank as he came out the door. In terms of being psyched for sprinting I was Olympic material, and this was my third unscheduled interruption.

We fled down the corridor, through the library, and (after another agonizing key search) back into the tunnel that had brought us there. I prayed silently that Taylor knew what he was doing. The worst was not knowing how far behind us Muller was. Sounds echoed in the tunnels but if he wasn't running we might not hear him. And aikido's not much use against a gun.

After a few twists and turns I realized with a sudden crisis of faith where Taylor was heading.

"Not the tower?"

"Just for a second."

At which point he leaned down, drew back his arm, and skimmed his lighted flashlight as far as it would go along the floor of a side tunnel to the south. Probably to divert Muller. I made a mental note that if we ever got out of this alive I'd make Taylor teach me how to go out of my body—his astral skills were creating too many scenes where I had to play ingenue.

By now we'd reached the last tunnel, and Taylor left me to stand guard while he ran to the tower. He told me to switch off my flashlight if I saw any sign of Muller, and that he was going to open the trapdoor—another diversionary tactic. I was petrified Muller would appear and block our escape route. The noise of the sliding panel could certainly be heard all through the tunnels and would accelerate his advance.

But Muller had apparently stopped to make sure we weren't hid-

ing in any of the unlocked rooms in the house, because before Taylor got back I heard a distant sound that could only be the library door opening and closing. Sounds of running footsteps in the distance echoed our own wild dash back up the tunnel and into a side tunnel that ran north. My relief that we were no longer running toward our pursuer was short-lived, for as soon as we entered the new tunnel Taylor reached over and switched off my flashlight and we continued in complete darkness. Taylor, holding my arm tightly, began to move very slowly, feeling his way with each step. I did the same, which was fortunate because after we'd gone about ten yards my right foot encountered an empty place. I drew back. Leaning down, I felt around with my hand over the slimy floor. There was an open manhole like the one in the tower, and on one side I could feel the top rung and sides of an iron ladder dropping down into the blackness. The fact that I couldn't see into it did nothing whatever to make it less repellent, but when Taylor tapped me on the hand I started to climb down.

When I got close to the bottom, the interval between the last rung and the floor was greater than I expected, and as I felt around frantically with my toe I had a momentary vision that the old fantasies of a hollow planet were true after all—that I was dangling over an eight-thousand-mile void, my feeble grasp of the little ladder all that prevented me from being sucked down to the center of this stygian blackness. These gloomy reveries were cut short by Taylor's stepping on my hand, which enabled me to find the floor immediately. I never completely shook the image, though. It's hard to run blindly through subterranean tunnels with a complete feeling of security once you know that such things as open manholes exist—even if your partner supposedly knows where they are. And the fact that we repeatedly ran smack into the sides of the tunnel did nothing to further my confidence in Taylor's grasp of our geographical position.

We now seemed to be running east again, back the way we had come, toward the library, and in a few minutes Taylor slowed down and began feeling along the north wall—looking for another side tunnel. We heard footsteps overhead. Taylor stopped short, knocking my flashlight against the wall. It was a tiny nick, but it echoed obstreperously through the tunnel. The footsteps stopped directly

above us. We waited. There was no sound. We didn't dare move. An hour went by (it was probably five minutes). Then we heard Muller's kindly, avuncular voice, so close we jumped:

"Come on, kids, don't make me kill you." A pause. "There's no place to hide down here. I know every inch of it." Pause. "And I'm much too old to fall for that flashlight trick." Pause. "The chief doesn't believe in unnecessary killings. But he doesn't like me to waste time, either." Pause. "So I'll give you five minutes to get back to the library. There's no way out of here except the way you came in. You'll have to come back eventually."

We waited. He counted off the minutes out loud. At five he started quickly down the tunnel in the direction of the tower but stopped after a dozen steps. We didn't move. The steps began again, but this time they were running. I think it had occurred to Muller that we might have found a rope or something to enable us to escape from the tower, and that if the noise he had heard wasn't us he was losing valuable time. The sight of the open tower door would confirm this opinion.

We started to run again. Now that Muller was in the tower we were no longer worried about light spilling up so I switched on my flashlight. We made two more turns and then Taylor stopped by a ladder. We scrambled up through another manhole into a new tunnel, but by now I had lost any sense of direction. The tunnels were all beginning to look alike to me. Another turn brought us to another ladder going up to another manhole, and as we started up we heard the tower panel close again. Muller hadn't wasted a whole lot of time on that particular bit of deception. This manhole proved to have a lid on it, but it was only wood, and when I carefully lifted it aside a little light showed through. We climbed up into what proved to be a kind of raised bunker facing toward the sea to the south. There was an opening on that side, which let in light—a long slit like the one at the top of the tower, about six feet wide and eight inches high. It was at eye level, and the drop outside was only about nine feet, Taylor said.

Even so, getting out wasn't the easiest thing in the world. You had to pull yourself up enough to work your head through, then get a leg up so you could stretch out horizontally, then get your head outside and your hands inside so you could drop your legs and still hang on until fully extended, then drop to the ground. There was a lot of

banging and scraping of flesh, not to mention the contortions required. If we had one of those bunkers in Las Lunas the chiropractic community would be guaranteed permanent full employment and wouldn't have to offer all those free exams and coupons.

We ran around the bunker to find a path north and in a few minutes were back on a familiar track. We were so used to being in complete blackness that it was some time before we realized there wasn't all that much light outside. It was hard to tell how much time we'd spent in the tunnel, but it was probably close to sunset and the thick fog made everything seem much darker. When we came to the forest of little spruce trees the webs were all outlined with dewdrops from the fog. The effect was so spectacular that only by visualizing Muller and his rifle could I bring myself to go crashing through it.

When we got to the beach the boat was still out there, just visible through the fog, banging softly against the pilings. Even when I'd first seen and fallen in love with the little craft, it hadn't looked so adorable.

The tide was out, which meant we didn't have as far to swim. On the other hand, there was a lot of muck exposed, which made the water look even less appealing than it ordinarily would have on such a cold, foggy day, with night coming on. I wasn't at all unhappy when Taylor gave a grim sigh and started to undress.

"I'll get the boat and bring it in while you get the stuff together." He was really into being The Guy: "Getting the stuff together" consisted of pulling our two sleeping bags out of the bushes. But I wasn't complaining. I ran to get them and dump them by the water, along with my flashlight and the compass, which had miraculously survived our marathon. Taylor was halfway to the boat and I was bundling up his clothes and shoes when I heard a noise in the woods a few yards away and spun around in terror.

It took me a second to adjust to what I saw. It wasn't Muller glaring at me from the edge of the woods. It was the A.C., his head still covered with blood, his huge hands opening and closing spasmodically.

Stranded

I COULD HAVE just abandoned our stuff and jumped in the water after Taylor with my clothes on. But compared to the prospect of the A.C. following me out and dragging us both under water by the throat, facing him on land was positively inviting. Anyway I didn't have time for a whole on-the-one-hand-on-the-other-hand routine because the second he saw me he charged, roaring bitterly, his head hunched forward and his gigantic arms swinging wildly at his sides. The fact that we had made nice and then clubbed him didn't sit at all well.

The force of his charge was actually an advantage to me. It took very little to throw him that first time—a little sidestep, a little pressure—and the sight of him flying into a patch of mucky clay under the receding tide gave me confidence. But in a second he was up again, covered with slime, looking like something from a Japanese monster movie as he lurched up from the water's edge.

The success of my first throw carried me through the second. He was still charging blindly and I just ducked aside and spun him around me, up onto the sandy part of the beach. But when he picked himself up and came at me again, more cautiously, I felt fear begin to ooze through my intestines. His enormous strength was offset by his sluggishness—I was always able to anticipate him—but how long could I keep it up? I'd had days of sloth and felt baggy around the edges. He seemed ready to go on forever. I looked at his massive forearms—bigger than a football lineman's thighs—and realized that I could never, ever, let him get his hands on me.

He shambled toward me slowly, like a slovenly assemblage of riprap—a primitive earth giant released from his Tartarean prison by some random earthquake. I felt myself tensing up. I would need to make only one small error for him to finish me off, and there were just a few throws I felt confident using with someone so huge and powerful. All he had to do was keep coming and he'd wear me down.

When he was three feet away he lunged, which probably saved my life. I went on automatic again, slipping by him (avoiding his clutching hand), twisting his giant forearm sharply, and spinning him back into the mud. But it wasn't a very good throw. I had tensed up so much I'd lost a lot of mobility, and it took more effort than it should have. And at the end of the throw my foot slipped on some wet pebbles and a muscle in my back snarled at me.

He picked himself up and began carefully stalking me again, just as if nothing had happened. Behind him I caught a glimpse of Taylor and was shocked to see he was still in the water, obliviously swimming to the boat. Had so little time passed? The A.C.'s caution was giving me too much time to think. And get scared. I was sweating already from just three lousy throws, and each one seemed to take twice as much energy as the last.

He was watching me carefully, taking only one step at a time, like an old man with a walker. Step. Pause. Step. Pause. Step. Pause. Step. Pause. Step. . . .

To my horror I found myself moving backward, and he charged, sensing my faltering confidence. I panicked. Picking up a handful of sand and pebbles, I threw it in his face and ran. I heard Taylor shout something as the A.C. thudded along behind me. It was hard to run

away from the boat, but if I could lure him far enough away I could circle around him and race back. I headed down the beach, realizing too late that it narrowed into a rocky cul-de-sac. I pivoted to dodge around him, slipped, and fell. By the time I had scrambled up again he was almost on top of me, and there was nowhere to go but forward. I ran to the end of the beach, jumped onto a rocky shelf and found myself surrounded by cliff on three sides.

I turned around. The A.C. was standing a few feet away, holding an immense boulder over his head. I braced myself, gritting my teeth and puffing with fatigue—determined to face death head-on, at least. I stiffened and glared at him defiantly.

I could have had a nice noble death right then and there if only I weren't so prosaic. At the mere thought the sound of mocking laughter bubbled inside my head, and I heard an echo of Tsubaki's voice saying: "John Wayne! John Wayne!"

Right. John Wayne indeed. I dropped my shoulders and took a breath, trying to relax. Serve up no death before its time, Castleman. The A.C. moved within range, readying the stone. I waited. Then I faked a backward cringe, and as he lunged forward, bringing down the rock with all his strength, I dropped with a feeling of complete surrender. Rolling between his legs, I spun around, pivoting on my knees, and knocked his legs out from under him. It wasn't hard to do. Wielding the boulder had thrown him off balance and I had waited until the very last moment to make my move. He fell heavily forward, smashing his face into the side of the cliff. He was up before I could get away, but cuts on his head were bleeding into his eyes and he was staggering. He attacked blindly and instinctively and I twirled him effortlessly in a half-circle. It seemed as if I hardly had to touch him—as if I had a direct channel to his brain and was simply carrying out his own impulse to throw himself.

He fell heavily and awkwardly, smashing knees and elbows. With tremendous effort he got one foot back under him and managed to pull himself halfway up—then collapsed onto his knees and started to sob desperately.

"I'm not a dummy! I'm not a dummy! I'm not a dummy!"

It shocked me to see him go to pieces. I actually had to fight off the temptation to go over and comfort him. Too many women have met their death doing dumb things like that.

I was startled by Taylor's voice: "I'm sorry about the mallet. We had to get away." Talk about liberal guilt.

He was standing nude in the boat a few feet away, holding an oar aloft. His apology galvanized Bill into action.

"Mr. Muller!" he shouted, still trying to stand up. "Mr. Muller!"

Taylor dropped the oar into the boat and jumped out to help me throw our things in and shove off. Then he began rowing furiously while I tried to start the engine. It kicked in on the third try and we were on our way. The last thing I saw before the island disappeared in the fog was Bill, finally on his feet, stumbling down to the water's edge, still bellowing for Muller.

Taylor shipped the oars and got out the compass. "Northeast by north," he said, setting it down in front of me. "I don't know what we'll do when we get near land. But at least we'll be away from here."

His teeth were chattering and he was shivering crazily. He got a handkerchief, dried himself off as best he could, and quickly got dressed.

A half hour later it was completely dark, and I had to use the flashlight to see the compass, muffling it in my jacket so it couldn't be seen from far off, although the fog itself would mask any small light from more than fifty yards away.

We talked about different routes back to the marina and Taylor wondered whether we should stop somewhere else for the night. I was against it.

"Does he know we came from Bailey's? That's the question. He might go directly there. Personally I'd rather not take a chance stopping somewhere else and then find him waiting for us at the marina. The main thing we have on our side is time. Let's get to Bailey's, get the car, and get going."

"We'll have a hell of a time going through that channel in the fog—" He stopped. "Do you hear anything?"

It was like a bright, wasplike buzz playing counterpoint to the easygoing cello of our own inboard motor. I've always thought trying to achieve high speed on the water was stupid—like going to Antarctica for a tan. Boats should just glide, or putter. But at that moment I wouldn't have turned down atomic power.

I shut the engine off to listen. Except for that nasty high-pitched drone, the air was completely still. Who else would be out on the

ocean at night in a thick fog? The water lapped the side of the boat. A foghorn sounded. Then another, farther off. The second one kept falling farther behind the first, so they would only sound together every fifteen minutes. The kind of thing you obsess about when you're trying to go to sleep at night.

The other engine cut off suddenly.

"He can't hear us at all with his engine going. It's too noisy."

"We could just sort of sit here. Then he wouldn't know where to go."

"Forget it, Taylor! What happens if the fog lifts? There aren't enough options out here."

The other engine started up again and I immediately started ours. In a little while I heard his stop again and I stopped mine. Thus began a cat-and-mouse game that lasted almost an hour. He would get a fix on us and try to close the gap. We would try to cut off whenever he did. He had the advantage of speed, we had the advantage of being able to hear him even with our engine running. But after a while he kept coming steadily, gaining on us rapidly.

"He knows we have to go straight on here," Taylor said, looking at the chart with the flashlight. "There's that big island to the left, and we must be near the Mink Rocks on the right. He wants to gain as much as possible on us before we have a chance to turn."

"Then maybe we should fool him and turn now. He's catching up. I retract my previous objection. We'll head for the rocks, cut the engine, and hope he goes by."

"We can't go in there. It's low tide. It'll be a mess in there. We'd never find our way out in this fog. We're in enough trouble."

"If we don't turn we're going to be shot. How much more trouble can you be in than that?"

As if in answer, there was a sharp crack and the boat lurched to the right. At the same time the wheel went slack in my hands. Until I realized what had happened I was convinced that the boat, fearing for its life, had heeded my warning and taken matters into its own hands. But it turned out to be the steering cable, which had snapped on the port side. It took a while to discover this in the dark, and a lot more time passed before we stopped trying to remedy the problem by sticking oars in the water and banging futilely on the rudder. By the time we had come to our senses and cut the motor, we could hear

two decidedly unwelcome sounds. The first was surf nearby—waves breaking on the outermost rocks. The second was the sound of silence. Muller had shut off his own engine in time to hear us turn eastward. As we listened, he started up again, coming closer.

I knew we were in a bad way when Taylor started muttering, "There's no place like home, there's no place like home," over and over again under his breath. Then we heard a third unwelcome sound—the sound of rocks scraping the side of the boat. I turned on the flashlight quickly. There were rocks all around us. We were trapped.

The Jar

IT'S TRUE THAT I panicked a little when the cable snapped and I heard the surf. And when Grace turned on the flashlight and I saw that we'd somehow managed to slide in among the Mink Rocks, all I could think about was that it was an eerie place to die. The night, the fog, all these rocks flung into the ocean like giants' gravel, the dark water—varying in depth from a few inches to thirty feet—the two foghorns pursuing each other, the sound of surf a few hundred feet away. Knowing that beyond that surf nothing stood between us and West Africa.

Something caught the rudder and slammed it to one side, jerking us almost out of the boat and halting our eastward drift abruptly. We each took an oar, probed the bottom, shoved off, backed up, and tried another route, figuring the farther in we got the longer it would take him to find us. It was a desperation measure, born of a sincere

sense of futility, because the minute the fog lifted or the tide came in there would be no hiding place and he could pick us off without any trouble. All he had to do was wait.

We heard his motor start up again, quite slowly, and every now and then it would seem as if the fog was lighter in the west, which meant he must have been using a flashlight. I guess he was anxious to get the job done so he could go home and get warm and watch TV or whatever he did when he wasn't killing people. Probably he thought it would be easier to dispose of us at night without attracting attention. There was another reason for his haste, too, but luckily neither of us thought of it then.

We managed to worm our way in deeper among the rocks, poling ourselves along with the oars, but it was getting harder to find channels, and the sound of Muller's engine was closing in. We were just able to see a triangular strip of pebbly beach ahead, thrown up by the currents. It was flanked by several yards of small, seaweed-covered rocks. Among these were two large rocks—one about ten feet high and twice as wide, the other much higher and skinnier and pointed at the top. Grace, who has a kind of compulsion to name things no matter what the circumstance, called them Don and Sancho. It wasn't much, but we were glad to see anything that we could put between us and a bullet.

In front of the beach the rocks around us opened up into a little lagoon, and as we started across it deepened suddenly. I'd gotten in the habit of leaning on the oar to propel us along, and all of a sudden the bottom wasn't there and I almost fell out of the boat. I managed to hook my foot under the seat and pull myself back without getting seriously wet, and I even kept hold of the oar. But I lost the flashlight. It floated gently down to the bottom, about eight feet deep—bubbling cheerfully all the way—and nestled feet first into the sand so that the light pointed skyward. It kind of lit up the whole lagoon with a hazy glow, although the fog was too thick for it to penetrate very far in any direction.

"That's nice, Taylor. Now he can shoot us without having to put on his glasses. Are you all right?"

"Just bruises. Keep paddling."

There was nowhere to go from here except onto the little beach, which was at the very edge of the flashlight's perimeter. It was only

two feet out of the water at its highest point and fell off quite steeply, and I didn't like it at all. There's something eerie about a beach in the middle of the ocean that doesn't lead to any land—especially a beach that was going to disappear when the tide came in. But we were powerfully drawn to the two big rocks. We stuck the anchor behind the tall one and had just started rummaging in the boat for something to defend ourselves with when we heard Muller's motor cut off.

We couldn't find anything very helpful on the boat. The oars were too clumsy, and the few tools would be pretty ineffectual. I finally settled for a boat hook. By now we could hear the muffled rattle of oars through the fog and an occasional scraping sound as Muller's boat touched bottom or slid past a rock. I started rigging up our sleeping bags with our caps and windbreakers so it would look like we were cowering in the bottom of the boat with just the tops of our heads and backs showing. I don't know why I did this. Muller was not a man to waste bullets, and even if he did he'd find out his mistake right away. Grace, meanwhile, was yanking at the loose end of the rudder cable—which was actually a brass chain composed of small, fine, flat links—trying to rip it off the steering post with her bare hands. She was swearing under her breath, and her hands were bleeding by the time she succeeded in pulling it free. I looked at the ten-foot length of flimsy, ineffectual chain, and she looked at my ridiculous capped dummies and neither of us said a word—just climbed out of the boat and made for the big rocks, Grace electing Don while I took Sancho. I think we had some notion that Muller would be dumb enough to walk between them. We held each other for a second and kissed each other good-bye, convinced we'd come to the end of it.

Hiding behind our rocks we were in the shadows, since the light from the sunken flashlight barely reached the beach. The muffled squeaks and scrapes came closer and closer, and after a while, as we stared into the illuminated mist, part of it condensed into a darker grayness. Then a hard line appeared, moving slowly toward us, gradually identifying itself as the bow of Muller's boat. For a brief moment it seemed empty, but then Muller's pudgy form unwrapped itself from the fog. He was holding a gun in one hand and a short paddle in the other, and he looked uneasy. Too many uncontrolled

variables for his liking, I guess—the night, the fog, the rocks—not to mention the flashlight at the bottom of the lagoon, which created an eerie luminescence to glide into on a bad night. I guess it made him a little jumpy, because the moment he saw the boat he dropped the paddle, whisked out a flashlight, and fired two shots into our dummies. The gun had a silencer on it. I've always hated that sound. It has a sickening gentleness about it—all too reminiscent of the sound of metal pellets hitting soft flesh. Sometimes I think I go to too many movies.

When Muller drifted close enough to see his mistake he swore irritably and flashed his light all around. But the fog just threw it back after a few yards. He landed, pulled his boat up next to ours, and started toward the big rocks. Where else, after all, could we be? I thought of making a dash for his boat, but by the time we'd launched it he'd have shot us several times over.

Then he stopped—perhaps struck by the same idea—and sat down heavily on the bow of his boat. He turned off his flashlight, then after a long interval suddenly flicked it on again, hoping, I guess, to catch us moving. Then he shut it off again. It looked as if he'd settled in for a long wait. Then on again. Cat and mouse. Then off again. Ten minutes passed. On again. I had visions of the tide coming in and gradually covering us while we stood there, rigidly, unable to move for fear of giving our position away. I composed little obituaries for myself: "Taylor Bishop, dead of multiple fish bites while attempting to maintain good posture. . . ."

But now Muller seemed to be gripped by some feeling of urgency himself, for he stood up abruptly, crossed the little bit of beach, and slowly approached us, walking carefully over the slippery rocks and flicking his light alternately over Don and Sancho. He must have caught sight of me once before I ducked back, because he stopped and after a moment shut off his flashlight and began very slowly to work his way around the outside of Sancho so as to come up behind me.

Luckily he was still wearing his boots and with his weight and all it wasn't that hard to tell where he was as he climbed over the seaweed-covered rocks. I heard him slip and fall two or three times, and tried to move with him so his noise would cover mine—always keeping Sancho between us. I didn't like being on the front side of

Sancho, with the light from the lagoon behind me, but it did help me see, after the total blackness of the back side, that there were footholds making an easy climb to the flat top.

I hesitated. To be on top of Sancho was to have a very momentary advantage followed by complete vulnerability. I decided against it, and soon afterward there was a blast of light between the rocks as Muller snapped his flashlight on, hoping to catch someone in the open. I prayed that Grace had circled her rock as I had mine. In a moment the flash went off again. I deliberately made a noise, hoping he'd follow me instead of Grace—maybe even think we were both behind the same rock, clinging to each other in our fear. I tried to make overlapping noises, like two people slipping on the seaweed, and apparently he went for it, because he suddenly rushed to the front of the rock and flicked his light on again. I barely had time to make it around. The light went off, and he followed. I couldn't hear Grace at all.

This went on for what seemed like hours. Muller stalking, doubling back, turning his flashlight on and off suddenly, me always keeping Sancho between us. The wet, fishy-smelling breeze, the blindness, the lapping water, the squelching sound of footsteps on seaweed.

I was the first to crack. About the fourth time I found myself near the footholds, I climbed up as lightly as I could and stood up, boat hook in hand. Muller was just coming to the back corner nearest the other rock, and as he flicked his light on again I brought the boat hook down on his gun arm as hard as I could. The gun fell, and I swung again for his head, but he ducked and I missed. Before I could do anything but recover my balance, I found myself staring into the flashlight, and then into the gun barrel as he found it and trained it on me. I think his arm was a little paralyzed and shaky from my blow, because he had to use his flashlight arm to steady it, and he was off balance, slipping on the rocks. I dropped flat and heard a bullet whisper by my head. At the same instant Grace was out of the shadows, her arm raised and the chain doubled up, and as Muller fired she whipped it around his neck with so much speed that it instantly made a half dozen loops. Then she yanked it back viciously. The loops held and he sank, his neck broken. Grace continued to

haul him backward across the rocks, slipping and sliding over the seaweed for almost thirty feet before I could climb down and catch up to her.

"It's okay! He's dead! It's okay!"

She looked at me a little wildly without slacking her grip on the chain, so that Muller's head was suspended, lolling above the ground. Grace doesn't like to be scared.

I put my arms around her.

"He's dead. We're safe. It's all right."

"He shot you."

"I'm all right. He missed."

"He never misses."

"He missed this time. He's dead."

"I thought he'd killed you." She gave a long shuddering sigh and looked down at Muller's swollen face and distended eyes. She let the chain slip from her hands and rubbed them together where the links had made deep white grooves. "I thought he'd killed you." She relaxed in my arms and started to sob—long racking sobs of sadness and relief. "I thought he'd killed you." I found I was crying, too.

We unwrapped the chain from Muller's neck, washed the blood off, put it back in the boat, and cast off. Muller and his boat we left as they were, for the tide to carry wherever it had a mind to. I often wondered who Sneath promoted to take his place, and if he was as good a shot.

With the help of Muller's flashlight we tried to work our way out of the rocks but it was hopeless. Every channel seemed to lead to a dead end, and finally we gave it up.

"Let's sleep and wait for the tide," Grace suggested. "As long as we're away from that lagoon."

So we unrolled our sleeping bags and got ready to spend the night. Muller's bullets had neatly passed through our caps and windbreakers, and when the bags were unrolled they looked as if they'd been attacked by moths. By sliding one inside the other we managed to cover most of the holes and achieve some protection from the cold and damp. And, of course, we had each other.

"Well, you got your wish," I said.

"What wish?"

"We're in the Mink Rocks."

"They don't seem sexy somehow."

"No."

"I'm hungry."

"We missed dinner."

"Bill's going to have lots of leftovers."

"Let's not talk about food."

"We'll go to sleep and wake up real early."

"And have a huge breakfast."

She kissed me. "I love you, space hero."

"I love *you,* Wonder Woman. You saved my face."

She slid her hand inside my jeans. "So you owe me."

"Ask."

"Make love to me. I'm cold. I've never been made love to in a boat. A small boat, at least. In the Mink Rocks, anyway. I need to forget the past few hours. I need to forget tomorrow. I need to forget I'm hungry. You have to make me forget all that so I can go to sleep."

"That's a lot."

"You can do it. I just know you can do it."

Afterward, lying in the bottom of the boat, snuggled into our ventilated bag, rocking gently as we drifted at anchor, we tried to count how many blasts it took for one foghorn to catch up with the other, but we fell asleep before we found out.

When we woke up it was just getting light. The fog was thinner and looked like it might burn off. The tide was coming in, and there were only a few rocks visible above the water. The anchor was dragging and we had drifted.

Our first task was to do something about the rudder. We tied the chain and refastened it with various small bits of wire Grace found. It came apart a few times and the boat had a constant tendency to veer to the right, but the arrangement worked well enough to get by.

The next problem was to navigate our way home. The fog was thinning out but even familiar landmarks look different in fog, and there wasn't much that was familiar in the first place. We had to go pretty slowly, between studying the chart, steering by compass, fixing the rudder, and keeping a lookout for rocks. I decided to take

the most direct route home since every turn created the possibility of missing a landmark or buoy.

It was a tense trip. We knew the rudder was biased, and worried about heading too far east and missing land altogether. Every time we heard surf we went toward it but weren't always able to identify what we saw. Finally a thick mass of evergreens appeared, which turned out to be the end of Bailey's. We had almost missed it.

The boat man was very nice and refunded some of our money on account of the rudder cable. Then Grace used his phone to call Waite, but there was no answer. This should have been reassuring, since it could have meant Sneath had kept his promise to rescue Athene. Somehow it wasn't.

"How am I going to know where she is? Even if he did take her?"

"He said he'd save Polly and Bran, too. They'd leave a note."

"What good would that do if everything's blown up? I'm so stupid! We never made any arrangements!"

"I don't think we ever really thought we'd make it out."

"And neither did he! That's the worst of it." She suddenly looked stricken. "'Enjoy the Poussin!' Remember that? 'Enjoy the Poussin! It'll be a long time before anyone sees it again!'"

"What's that got to—"

"I so much wanted to believe him! I wanted to believe that Athene would be taken care of. I didn't even hear it!"

"Hear what?"

"Why do you think Sneath isn't going back to the island? Why do you think he told us all that? He said we could leave after the explosion, but this whole area will be contaminated! That's why Muller was in such a hurry. We're only a hundred miles from Boston as the crow flies—with a prevailing wind to carry the fallout! He was just going to leave us on the island to die! Why would he save us, or anybody? He's thinking in round millions!"

"Call Bran and Polly. We've got to catch them before they leave the house."

Polly answered. They were both home and hadn't heard anything from Sneath or anyone else about leaving.

"Waite called, though. He's bringing Athene into town for a couple of days and wanted to know if he could leave her with you

overnight. I told him I didn't know when you were getting back—I mean, you didn't tell us or anything—so what was I supposed to do? You never tell us what's going on, you know? So he got real salty with me—like you had said you were going to spend time with her and everything and what the fuck was going on and it was irresponsible—and I told him to shut up and just bring her and we'd see, I mean I don't have to take that crap, I don't even know the dude! It's not fair, Grace, leaving us with all this shit to deal with, and we don't even know what's going on or what to tell people, and we still don't know what happened next door or anything!"

"What time are they coming?" Grace asked sharply.

"He said they'd be here around noon."

"That means one, knowing Waite. Okay, look. We'll probably be home before then. If we're not, just have him drop her off. Tell them we're on our way. And don't go anywhere. In fact, pack up your things and be ready to leave. It's really important. We'll tell you absolutely everything when we get there. Promise!"

"You always say that."

Grace was obviously relieved to know where Athene was and that there was time to save her, but I had a hard time persuading her to stop for breakfast.

"We're both really hungry and tense, and we've got an hour more than we need to get there before Athene does—"

"I know, but who can eat?"

"I can. Then we can talk about what we're going to do."

"Do? We're going to get Athene, and Polly and Bran, and get the fuck away from Boston! We're going to drive back to California!"

"I mean about the bomb!"

"The bomb. The bomb. You're right. I'm sorry. All it takes is one kid to completely erase my sociopolitical consciousness. Jesus Christ, that's awful! I was all ready to ditch five million people just as long as I got my own kid out of danger."

"You weren't about to let your ex-husband in the lifeboat, either," I said, laughing.

"Oh, well, that's different. No loss there. If I knew that much about all the others I could make an intelligent judgment." She paused. "You've got to go 'out' again. Can you do it in the car?"

"Not if we're moving."

"Then skip breakfast. We'll buy some bread and fruit and juice and eat it in the car. Then we'll park somewhere, and I'll chew my nails and scream a lot while you save Boston. And Kiev. I won't wait longer than forty-five minutes, though. I can't, Taylor. I just can't. You know the way home. If you can't find your body just check out the Maine turnpike. I'll leave the top down." She was chewing her nails already, just thinking about it. I wanted to believe that a little of her anxiety was for me.

"Do you think we should try to call somebody? Some public official? Warn them? Somebody who could stop it? Tell them. . . ." I trailed off, trying to imagine what I would say to some faceless bureaucrat over a long-distance phone.

Grace smiled. "Sure. 'Would you hold the line for a minute, sir, so I can trace this call and send somebody to lock you up in the nearest zoo?'"

We stopped at the store for some food and took off. The fog was almost gone and it was sunny now. Grace said she'd feel better about my going "out" once we were on the freeway, since the road to Brunswick was a narrow, two-lane affair, vulnerable to delays. So we drove through town and onto the freeway, stopping at the first rest area, where Grace parked at a weird angle to give me a good north-south axis, and I crawled in the back.

I had a little trouble getting "out"—there was so much tension. Nothing makes it as hard as that I've-got-to-go-here-I've-got-to-go-there-I-have-to-finish-this-and-then-do-that-and-generally-get-my-life-organized-and-under-control sort of feeling. Also, Grace's tension and impatience kept spilling over the back of the front seat and making little whirlpools on the floor that were very distracting. But after about ten minutes I finally worked my way out.

The first thing I discovered was that the jar had followed me. It still went into the ground, but the ground was now the parking lot. For some reason this made it seem less "real." I thought about what Grace had said about an opening. Where would he hide it if there was one? Obviously somewhere underground. I followed the side of the jar down through the pavement and into the earth, looking always for the lowest point. And sure enough it began to slope more and more and to narrow in toward a center. It was the neck of the

jar, embedded in earth. I flew into the mouth, through all the dirt and rock, only to find the opening stopped with a huge cork. I tried to fly through it but couldn't.

"This is ridiculous," I thought. "I'm flying through pavement, earth, and rocks, and I can't fly through an imaginary cork?" But I couldn't. I tried playing along with its pretense of substantiality by pushing at it, trying to pop it out of the mouth of the jar, but it didn't move at all. This made me very angry, and for some reason I sank my teeth into it and pulled backward, like a dog worrying a stick. Instantly it slid back and floated free inside the jar. I ducked out through the opening and thought of Sneath. I took off like a shot but almost immediately collided with another surface. Another jar, bigger than the last. Grimly I floated underground and found the opening, corked as before and susceptible to the same approach I'd used on the first one.

And so it continued. There were seven jars in all, and by the time I'd escaped from the last one I felt weak and drained. Whatever Sneath had used on me, it was strong. I thought of him again and found myself in a large mahogany-filled office looking at Sneath's back. But before I had a chance to do anything I felt myself suddenly seized from behind and whooshed out of the office, like a cat being picked up by the scruff of the neck and hurled out of a window. I landed with a palpable bump back in the car, and as I turned to see who had done it, there was Louise, standing flat-footed on the hood of the car, shaking her finger at me sternly, and frowning. I slunk back into my body and opened my eyes. She was gone.

I sat up and swallowed. Grace turned round and looked at me, puzzled. "That was quick. What happened?"

I told her.

"Well, I guess there's no use trying to do anything down there," she said, gnawing her lip moodily. "What about the missile itself? Theirs, I mean."

"I can *go* there. I don't know what I could do, though."

"If they're doing some kind of psychic launch, like Wyatt Earp . . . maybe you could figure out. . . ." Her voice trailed off.

"Maybe. I can try anyway." I settled myself down again. "Wish me luck."

She held up a finger, motioning me to wait while she rummaged in her purse with the other hand. After a moment she pulled out a gauzy purple scarf and tied it around my arm.

"Now you're wearing my colors," she said.

I closed my eyes and thought about the missile. For a minute or two nothing happened. Louise had kind of scared me and I still felt a little like a six-year-old after a scolding. I had to do a deep-breathing meditation and try to leave all that behind me. I began to picture the missile, all shiny in its silo on some Russian plain. . . . But what if it was on a submarine? I didn't have much to go on. I decided to forget about the surroundings and concentrate on the missile itself. The picture gradually got stronger and clearer, subtly changing shape and developing more details and markings. I could see the Soviet insignia, even the seams and blemishes. There was a brilliant spot of reflected light, too. And then a background finally came into focus. But it wasn't a silo or the interior of a sub. It was a bright blue background—the blue of a clear sky and of water below. The missile was in the air, flying, and I was flying along beside it. The reflected light was the morning sun. I looked around. To the west I could see a brown mist. Then land. Then the skyline of a city. It was Boston.

The moment I realized where we were, I tried to stop it. I kept putting myself in front of the missile, but of course it would just pass right through me. Then I tried to push against the side of the nose to deflect it off course, but I just went through *it*. There was nothing I could do at all except fly helplessly along with it as it began its inexorable descent into the heart of the city. The ground came up toward us with supersonic speed, and just before impact I instinctively abandoned ship and ducked back into my body.

I felt weak and sick as I struggled up to a sitting position and frantically scanned the horizon. Grace, who was wired for action and desperately impatient, spun around immediately.

"What is it? What is it?"

I had a hard time finding my voice. The transition had been much too abrupt, and I couldn't make my mouth move. And I didn't want to lend reality to what I'd seen by putting words to it.

"He lied," I got out finally. "Sneath. It's early. The bomb . . . the missile. It's already . . . landed."

She grabbed my arm in horror and dug her nails in until I winced with pain.

"Athene!" Her face was all contorted. Then she let go, spun around and jumped out of the car, looking to the southwest. I climbed out after her.

"I didn't hear anything. And there's no cloud," she said faintly, clutching at straws.

I tried to comfort her but she shook me off.

"I'm going," she said, getting back in the car. "You don't have to."

I got in with her. "If you are, I am."

She looked at me gratefully. "If it's happened, I don't want to live. I'd rather go quickly than slowly anyway."

I nodded and turned on the car radio as she screeched onto the highway, fighting her anxiety in the only way she knew and compulsively searching the sky for what she didn't want to see.

Of all the strange and wonderful things that happened to us in our travels, the most miraculous was that we didn't get stopped for speeding as Grace flew through Maine and New Hampshire. Still we saw no sign of a mushroom cloud, nor was there any emergency broadcast on the radio. But soon after we entered Massachusetts there was a news announcement:

> At ten o'clock this morning an unexploded Russian missile completely demolished a Kentucky Fried Chicken restaurant in downtown Boston. One man, a haberdasher, was killed, and twelve others injured, two of them seriously. More details as soon as we have them.

Burglars

BY THE TIME Taylor and I got to the house, a mass exodus out of the city was in progress, with traffic jams everywhere. Meanwhile those with cooler heads were quietly looting the homes of those who had panicked, while the overwhelming majority, as usual, were going about their business as if nothing untoward had taken place. Polly and Bran jumped on us the minute we walked in, convinced that we could explain everything, and to compensate for our past sins we gave them a complete briefing even before we'd had a chance to get the story on the bombing.

We kept the radio and TV going and between them were able to piece together a very rough idea of what had happened. Sneath had apparently moved his timetable up six hours because of our escape. Otherwise he'd carried out his plan exactly as he told us, except that neither of the bombs had exploded. Had we convinced him some-

how? Or was he just teasing us with all his talk of hard lessons and slow learners?

Whatever had happened, the two governments were obviously more upset that the bombs had malfunctioned than that they had fired accidentally. Heads were going to roll, you could be sure of that. And the fact that the accidents had happened simultaneously implied that their security had been "deeply penetrated," as they say. Necrophiliacs have an intense fear of anal rape: They worry constantly about "getting screwed," "covering their ass," and having their security penetrated.

The official U.S. position, however, was that there had *been* no accidental American firing and that the Russians were simply using this false claim to cover up their own attack. The president cited it as a "typical example of Soviet duplicity," and various experts were called in to denounce the Russian photographs of the U.S. missile as "transparent fakes." This stance was stoutly maintained even when news of the accidental firing leaked out from the overseas missile site, where hundreds of people had noticed it. (History shows that the average American will believe anything a president says even after he's been caught lying.)

The only real facts we were getting from the frenzied and garbled news reports were that a Russian missile had landed and malfunctioned, that people had been killed or injured, and that the Russians were making similar accusations about us. The rest was the usual bland commentary, some hastily assembled background information, and the obligatory human interest interviews.

The son of the haberdasher who'd been killed called for a massive retaliatory strike to do away with the "evil empire" once and for all, but the widow took a more conciliatory position:

"That's Harry! Always getting himself in some kind of situation. If there's trouble, he'll find it! What can I say? He's accident-prone. Why should I blame the Russians? Did they know he'd be there? Who could have expected? A vegetarian!"

Some of the injured were also interviewed and gave their analyses:

"One minute I'm loadin' fries into these little envelopes, gettin' 'em ready, y'know? The next minute, POWIE! The whole side of the rest'rant is gahn! I'm standin' 'ere lookin' at Boylston Street! Wit' hot

grease all over my ahm! I'm disfiguhed f'life! They oughta take an' nuke those bastids!"

The distraught owner of the franchise took a broader view:

"It couldn't have happened at a worse time! My insurance doesn't even cover it!"

And finally, the in-depth perspective of a customer, as he was carried off on a stretcher, clutching the mike that had been thrust in his bloodied face:

"I'm sorry, Helen! I'm sorry! I couldn't help myself!"

Then there were background reports on the Russian nuclear buildup, the limitations of our radar defense system, the inferior nature of Russian technology, and the history of the Colonel Sanders empire.

In the middle of all this Waite arrived with Athene. I was so glad to see her and so relieved after all my anxieties about her over the last two days that I started sobbing convulsively. Waite, of course, thought I was being a typical hysterical mother. He wanted to talk about whether or not we should evacuate and asked everybody in the room in turn, including Athene. I suggested that we were in the safest place in the country now, since we'd already *had* our bomb and the others hadn't, but he wasn't satisfied until we'd all obsessed about it for an hour, whereupon he left. Somewhere in the middle of the discussion I took Athene off to show her where she was going to sleep (Polly's old room), and she had a chance to tell me all her own news without interruption.

After Waite had gone we checked out the TV again. The network coverage was winding down. One had already switched to a golf tournament, another to the baseball game, and the third was just finishing up with a sidewalk poll of people walking on the Boston Common. The responses were discouraging:

"I think it shows very clearly that we're not putting enough money into defense," one man said. "They got right by our radar. Somebody's not doing his job."

"They're testing us!" another one claimed. "Trying to see how much we'll put up with. If we let 'em get away with this, they'll be right back tomorrow with a live one!"

A third respondent had a different view: "Everybody gets hyster-

ical about what a close call it was, but let's look at the facts: Worse accidents than that happen every day. I say if we can get off that easy the system's working pretty well!"

And one dignified, well-dressed elderly man entering a large house on Beacon Hill remarked cheerfully, "Well, it looks like World War III!"

Taylor laughed bitterly. "I guess Sneath was right. It'll take more than a near miss to turn those people around."

Polly was stunned. "Nothing's going to happen! Nothing! I mean all those people are just going to go around like before, only worse!"

"We can't leave it like this, Taylor," I said.

"No." He made a face. "But who'd believe us?"

"How about a classified document? Would they believe that?"

Polly looked scared. "Document?"

"What if we made Wyatt Earp public?" I suggested. "Don't you think that would have an impact? Combined with what's happened? Don't you think that would make people nervous enough to do something?"

"Steal it?" Polly wanted to know.

"They're not going to give it to us! Taylor knows the place inside out."

"Do you realize what you're talking about?" Bran looked shocked. "Do you know how this would be looked upon by most people? You're talking about stealing a classified document. That's called espionage. They'll assume we want to sell it to the Soviets. That we're Soviet spies. We could be tried for treason!"

"Don't you think I know that? They always call you 'traitor' when you expose them. I don't give a good goddamn what they call us or what they do to us! Ten million people almost died! And they're still lying and covering up and rattling their idiotic sabers! What kind of a cockroach would worry about his own silly skin when ten million fellow beings were in danger? That's criminal negligence! We're accessories! If you're not willing to damage your precious reputation you're no better than the goddamn president!"

"I've never really thought of myself as a cockroach, Grace—"

"I'm sorry."

"—But I did want everyone to be completely aware of what we're getting into. I don't want us charging off quixotically without know-

ing the consequences. We'll probably spend the rest of our lives in prison."

"So what?"

"You won't have Athene. She'll be brought up by her father. Her mother will be disgraced."

"At least she'll grow up."

Polly was wide-eyed.

"Are you going to do it?" she asked Bran.

He sighed and nodded. "What about you?"

She nodded tremulously.

"I mean, I don't want to. It'll fuck up my career and everything, but shit, what else can I do? You're all going."

"You're a lot younger," I pointed out. "You've got more to lose. Taylor and I feel pretty lucky not to be dead already, and Bran's had a reasonably full life. Especially lately."

Bran smiled in agreement. But Polly wasn't about to be patronized.

"Look, I wouldn't feel all that good about myself if I didn't do all I could, you know?"

I looked around. "Taylor?"

He nodded. "It'll take some planning, though."

The first step was for Taylor to fly to Steinkopf and reconnoiter. He knew the building well enough, but there were particulars we needed: the combination of the safe, the security procedures, which rooms were kept locked, and so on.

Luck was on our side in one respect. Dr. Schaufenster, the eminent head psychologist at the lab, had been called to Washington for a week and was making a rare Saturday afternoon trip to his office to consult with his number-two man, Dr. Nagen, who would be acting head while Schaufenster was away. Taylor followed Schaufenster closely while he was there and overheard a conversation he had with the security guard who came on duty just before Schaufenster left. It concerned some Red Sox outfielder who Schaufenster thought was overrated and the security guard didn't. I've never paid much attention to these esoteric jock discussions so I couldn't tell you who the outfielder was or which side of the debate I thought was right, but almost everyone in Boston is for some reason deeply devoted to the

Red Sox, though they rarely receive any return on their investment.

"The complete Iris file is in the safe in Schaufenster's office," Taylor reported. "I have the combination, but we'd have to get by the gate and the security guard downstairs, and Schaufenster's office is locked."

"What do you need for the gate?"

"A pass. And the only person who can issue a visitor's pass is Schaufenster."

We thought of various schemes, but all of them foundered on the fact that we not only needed to get in but also to get out again without being noticed. I was stumped.

"There's no way we can do that without passing ourselves off as legitimate," Taylor said. "And what legitimate reason would anyone have for going to a laboratory on a Saturday night? They've never had any reason to be super-paranoid about security—it's not the army or anything—but they do their job."

There was a long silence. Polly broke it.

"What if you were like friends of somebody and wanted to look around? *I'd* be curious. I mean I *am* curious."

"Or a visiting fireman of some sort," Bran suggested. "No, that's too trite. A new colleague, perhaps, looking the place over—"

"And he brings his whole family!" Polly interrupted enthusiastically. She was determined to get aboard. "Because they're all so curious and they made Daddy promise to take them all with him to look around and so he did because he can deny them nothing!"

"But someone has to give them legitimacy," Taylor objected, "and the only person who can do that is Schaufenster."

"Could you imitate his voice?" I asked. "You could call the gate and tell them to give you a pass."

Taylor looked doubtful. "'This is Dr. Schaufenster,'" he intoned in a high, reedy voice. "'A new colleague is going to join us. . . .'" He shook his head. "I don't think so."

Bran wouldn't let him off the hook. "It may not be precisely his, dear boy, but it's uncannily unlike your own. I think it's a marvelous place to start."

"The ball game!" Polly said suddenly. "Is it on?"

"The ball game?"

"Whatsisname, the outfielder! You could mention him!"

"Was anyone else around?" I asked him.

"No. Not a soul."

We went back to the TV. It was the second game of a double-header, just getting under way. We watched Whatsisname carefully for flaws in his performance and decided that a case could be made for his having been a little slow starting after a fly ball that had dropped in for a double. The boys tried to come up with some outfielders in living memory who might have caught it, but they were limited by their modest interest in the game and their grave lack of familiarity with the Red Sox. Personally, as a spectator sport, I put baseball in the same category as bowling, golf, and snail-racing, so I was no help.

Polly, who soaks up information indiscriminately and never loses any of it, was the one who came through: "Yaz would've had it!" she said decisively.

This led to some confusion when I told her rather sharply to stick to the point, laboring under the delusion that "The Yaz" was some sort of comic-book super-hero (or super-villain—you never know who's going to show talent in the outfield).

Once over this hurdle we pulled together nicely and by dinnertime had constructed a workable plan. Taylor, impersonating Schaufenster, would call the security guard, chat about the Red Sox, and tell him that a new psychologist was going to start work in a couple of weeks; that he, Schaufenster, wanted to see him and show him around before leaving Washington; that he was terribly rushed trying to get away and had a great many things to do; and that he might not arrive at the lab before the visitor did. Oh, and by the way, the visitor might be bringing his family along, too—a wife and three children, two of them grown.

"*Three* children?" Bran objected.

"Unless one of you wants to baby-sit." I knew nobody did.

"We can't take *her!*"

"We can't *leave* her. And I'm not staying behind. I want her with me. Besides, she'll add a convincing touch to what would otherwise be a very suspicious-looking 'family.'"

Athene, who had gotten bored with the discussion early on and

gone into a corner to draw, suddenly became alert.

"I want to go!"

"But what if she says something?"

"I won't."

"She won't."

"I'll be quiet."

"She'll be quiet."

"Oh, Jesus, it's risky."

"It'll be more risky without her."

We decided that Bran would play the new psychologist.

"Do you have a tweed jacket with elbow patches?"

"In the summer?"

"Scientists don't honor seasons. You can't be a research scientist in Boston without elbow patches."

"I'm a foreigner."

"That's good. That's very good. Everyone knows foreigners are crazy."

"Einstein didn't have elbow patches."

"Are you sure?"

"He had sweaters."

"In the summer?"

"He didn't wear socks."

"We're getting off the point," Taylor objected.

Bran assured us that he could come up with a convincing outfit. Obviously I would have to play the wife, which presented problems. Short of a heroic makeup job there was no way I could pass myself off as Taylor and Polly's mother, and we didn't look anything alike. But with Athene so much younger, and visibly related, it might look as if Bran had had two children by a previous marriage. All Athene had to do was to call him "Daddy" at least once and keep quiet the rest of the time. I told her I would stay close to her and she could whisper things in my ear. She had picked up some of the excitement and was delighted to be able to play a part. But I was much more nervous about how she'd hold up than I let on.

Taylor was tense and stuttery rehearsing his phone call, but when the time came he seemed completely at ease. He chattered away about the Red Sox until I started to worry that he was overdoing it.

And when he identified the new scientist as Dr. Patito instead of the innocuous name we'd all agreed on, Polly and I lost it and had to smother each other with sofa cushions.

Next we got dressed in our straightest, most East Coast clothes, trying to create an illusion of sartorial compatibility—rare in actual families but essential for a contrived one. And just before leaving, Taylor made a second Schaufenster call, in which he sounded nervous and harassed and told the guard he'd be later than he thought and the guard should show Dr. Patito and his family up to his office and let them wait for him there.

The first part of the plan went off without a hitch. We drove up to the gate in Bran's car, Mommy and Daddy in the front (with Daddy at the wheel) and the kids in the back (Athene wedged in the middle for ease of silencing). The man at the gate waved us right through and the security guard greeted us cordially and ushered us upstairs. Ten minutes after our arrival at the gate we were inside Schaufenster's handsome, unstinted office, sitting comfortably on red leather furniture within ten feet of the safe. It seemed too good to be true.

And it was. The last thing the guard said to us as he went out the door was:

"You just make yourselves comfortable. Dr. Schaufenster may be a little late but you're in luck: Dr. Nagen's still here and when I told him you were coming he said he was very anxious to meet you. Dr. Pelleteur's in the building, too. He always comes in Saturday nights for an hour or so and makes phone calls. So if you'd like, I'll send them up."

"Don't trouble yourself," Bran said quickly. "I don't want to disturb anyone's routine. Dr. Schaufenster just thought the family would like to see the place. This isn't really a . . . business visit."

"No trouble! No trouble! I'll send them right up. No use sitting around here with nothing to do!"

And he dashed out. Bran made a face.

"God protect us from helpful people!"

Taylor was already at the safe. But he had only managed to get through half the combination when there was a knock at the door. Taylor scrambled for the sofa as Bran opened it.

"Dr. Patito? I'm Dr. Pelleteur. I just ran into Frank in the hall and

he tells me you may be working with us. So I thought I'd drop in and say hello! Welcome to the Duck Pond, as we call it! I hope you'll be happy here."

Pelleteur was enormously tall and held himself stiff and erect except for his long gangly arms, which were perpetually in motion: gesturing, pleading, ingratiating, undulating. Athene was hypnotized. Taylor hadn't said much about Pelleteur—except that he was the resident eccentric at Steinkopf, headed the clairvoyant spying project, and was the lab's unofficial drug dealer. Since Steinkopf had been granted certain legal immunities, Pelleteur made his telephone contacts from within the building, and it was in this role that he was apparently functioning now.

"An unusually warm night!" he murmured significantly, as soon as we had got past the introductions. We all nodded profoundly and confirmed his judgment with alternatively worded meteorological observations of our own.

"On such a night," he went on, bugging his eyes a little, "who can work?"

Bran suggested that working on a Saturday was in a general way conducive to poor health.

"Ah, but alas! We cannot always pick and choose when we will work and when we will not!"

"True enough."

"Tell me, then," Pelleteur asked, inching closer to him and playing with a button on Bran's jacket, "what do you do when you have to work on a hot night and there's no air conditioning, or you're feeling dull and logy?"

I began to catch his drift, but Bran, who hadn't been briefed on Pelleteur, did not.

"I usually sweat a great deal and then fall asleep."

"But then your work!" His smile was turning gray. "What happens to it?"

"Well, it doesn't get done. Until the next time."

"But what if it can't wait? Don't you ever . . . take anything?" His hands made little motions like an eighteenth-century fop with a snuffbox.

"Take anything? Oh, I see. Well, I might. In an emergency. I don't hold with drugs too much."

"Have you done much work with psychics?"

"Quite a bit."

"I think you'll find it useful to expand your horizons, Dr. Patito. We find that certain drugs can be very helpful in enhancing psychic capabilities." He manipulated a thousand dials in front of his face. "Reduces the noise from everyday reality-consciousness!" He bugged his eyes again.

"Yes, I suppose it would."

"Well, if you ever need anything in that line," Pelleteur murmured, gliding to the door, "don't hesitate to let me know."

He bowed stiffly to "the family," his hands flying about wildly, and went out. Before Taylor was even up off the couch he stuck his head back in again.

"Or just to relax. Have a good time." He grimaced, an alien imitation of a smile. Then he left.

Taylor bolted for the safe again and managed to finish opening it just as another knock came, this time followed immediately by the entrance of Dr. Nagen. Nagen was a small, thin-lipped, wiry man prone to long, morose stares alternating with sudden suspicious glances. He gave the impression that he never smiled, but his eyes and mouth were so small I don't know that I'd have noticed if he did. He didn't seem very smart but he was dogged, which was worse.

Taylor stood up like a shot and pretended to be staring out a window over the fields of Devon. Bran did the introductions again and when Taylor walked over to shake hands I was horrified to see the door of the safe slowly fall open. Polly, bless her, had seen it, too, and turned on that instant charisma of which only certain desperately vulnerable people are capable, captivating Nagen as utterly as anything can captivate a mole. This gave me a chance to stroll over in front of the safe and casually kick it shut again, and then, on the pretext of delicately scratching my calf with my other foot, lock it.

Getting rid of Nagen was another matter. He seemed suspicious, and suddenly Bran's posing as a new man on the staff didn't seem like such a wonderful idea.

"Dr. Schaufenster never told me you were coming."

"I guess he was a bit flustered getting ready to go to Washington."

"He usually consults me on everything," Nagen said beadily. "Who are you replacing?"

"Oh, I'm not replacing anyone," Bran reassured him.

"Where's the money coming from then? We don't have money for another position."

"I come with my own grant," Bran smiled.

"Who's funding you?"

"The Bledny Foundation. I'll only be part-time."

"What are you studying?"

"Well, I'm particularly interested in brain-wave research. Achieving psychic connection through synchronization of brain waves and polygraphic indices."

I was proud of him.

"But surely you're familiar with Ameisenhaufen's work?" Nagen objected. "His review cast definitive doubt on that possibility, I thought."

But Bran was unflappable. The one intellectual skill taught in all graduate institutions of learning is the ability to categorize information before it has an opportunity to penetrate one's brain.

"Ameisenhaufen! You can't be serious! The man's a notorious anti-isogenist! Take a look at the lead article in the next issue of *Psychic Review*. By Fourmilier. I read it in manuscript. He absolutely decimates Ameisenhaufen!"

"But Emmet and Pismire's research had completely negative results."

"Of course! They didn't control for biorhythms!"

"Are you sure about that?"

"Absolutely! Saccade and Pinzette's study found that when you control for biorhythms the correlation is significant at the .001 level! Are you familiar with the monograph by Schleichen, Schleimhaut, and Schneuzen?"

Bran had apparently decided that offense was the best defense, and indeed Nagen seemed quite cowed. But he obviously had no intention of leaving us to our own devices until he found out what Schaufenster was up to and what effect Patito's arrival was going to have on his own future. He clung like a limpet, his little eyes darting in all directions.

"Well, I guess you don't want to listen to all this," he said to me.

"Oh, don't worry about us, we're just along for the ride." I turned to Bran. "Wouldn't you like to look around, dear? Perhaps Dr. Nagen can give us a tour."

"Oh, yes!" Polly said brightly. Taylor looked sullen. Bran turned on the affability.

"I'd be fascinated to see your work," he said.

Nagen shrugged and started for the door. I picked up Taylor's cue.

"Don't you want to go, dear? It should be very interesting. . . ."

"No!" Taylor said coldly. "I'll stay here." He was playing to perfection the role of a sulky adolescent forced to spend the evening with his family when he wanted to go out with his girlfriend.

"There isn't much I can show you without clearance, anyway," Nagen grumbled.

"Who's Clarence?" Athene piped up—a distant early warning.

"Why don't you two go ahead," I said, the accommodating-matron-who-wouldn't-understand-all-that-technical-business-anyway. "I'll stay here with the children."

"*I* want to go!" Polly insisted, and I pretended to give in reluctantly. Actually I was anxious for her to be available to distract Nagen if Bran's façade began to show any cracks, and she seemed to have the same idea in mind.

As soon as they were gone, Taylor jumped for the safe, but once again he was frustrated. Pelleteur must have been hiding in the corridor somewhere, because the moment the others left he knocked at the door and came gliding in.

"You folks are all alone!" he said with surprise, waving his hands about like a Balinese dancer.

"Yes."

"Can I get you anything?"

"Not unless you've got a cold soft drink that my daughter could have." I could see Athene was beginning to get bored and restless with all these delays, and I wanted her roving mind to fasten on something harmless, like thirst.

"Let me look. Schaufenster usually has something salted away here." He rummaged in a little cabinet placed conveniently near the sofa and chairs.

"All we have is cognac, scotch, and . . ." He held up a bottle of Fernet Branca. Athene made a face. He turned to me. "Would you . . . ?"

"No thank you."

He looked at Taylor, whose sullen demeanor no longer required

acting ability. "You look a little under the weather, my friend. Could you use a little . . . pick-me-up?" He flapped his eyebrows suggestively.

"No. I'm all right."

Pelleteur turned back to me. "Well, I'll just leave these out . . . in case," he said, putting the bottles and some glasses on a tray in front of us and retreating a little.

"I know this is stressful, waiting around on a hot night. Nothing to do. A strange place—"

"It's fine, really," I said. "We're fine."

He straightened up, his hands curled in front of him. His head swiveled on his neck and he looked longingly at Athene.

"Really. Nothing!" I said firmly.

My impatience must have leaked over onto Athene, because at that moment she said in what seemed like a deafening shout: "Mommy! When are we going to steal the plans?"

I was paralyzed. Children are *never* not listening, I thought. I've spent too much time away from her this summer. I've forgotten the basics. Children are *always* listening.

Fortunately Pelleteur was fatally single-minded.

"Isn't that cute? She seems a little restless. I've got some paregoric in my office . . ."

"Really. We. Don't. Need. Anything. At. All."

"Oh."

He rubbed his elbow in perplexity, which made the hand above it rotate in the opposite direction. This in turn made Athene laugh delightedly. She thought it was some sort of trick, and it did look strangely mechanical.

The impasse was broken by the sound of voices in the corridor. Pelleteur looked up with a start reminiscent of Bambi's mother, quickly nodded and bowed, and skated out the door just before the others returned. Nagen looked after him with a baleful glance. Bran looked inquiringly at Taylor, who shrugged.

Polly rose to the occasion.

"Dr. Nagen?" she said in a treacly voice that would have set me barfing at any other time. "Could you show me where the little girls' room is?" I wouldn't have minded a trip myself and I didn't think

Athene could hold out very long, but I didn't want to cramp Polly when she was on a roll.

Nagen gave Bran a brief, uneasy look and ushered her out.

"I'm afraid it's quite a little ways," he said, not sounding afraid at all.

As soon as they had left, Bran spotted the cognac and poured himself a sizable drink, downing it with a fine disregard for its quality.

"I can't keep this up much longer," he said to Taylor, who was fiddling with the safe again.

"Another one of those and you won't be able to," I said sharply, remembering Bran's low tolerance for alcohol.

"Don't be bossy, Grace! Look at my hands!" He was shaking. "I'm not used to this sort of thing!" He poured another and sipped it slowly.

I had taken up sentry duty at the door in case Pelleteur reappeared before Taylor could finish opening the safe. I could pass it off as matronly anxiety—my virginal daughter trotting off to the ladies' room with a strange mole.

From what Polly told me later, my feigned fears were not without foundation: "All the way down the hall he kept putting his nose in my neck like a puppy and kind of snuffling around. It was unbelievably gross! And he's like staring at me the whole time with those beady little eyes—all I could think of was that creepy movie about the guy with all the rats. And then he starts laying this whole trip on me about not being shy and how he's used to working with psychics where everyone can see into your mind anyway so there's no use hiding anything. And then he tells me about this telehypnotic dude who can arouse women sexually at a distance so that by the time he walks in the door they're all hot and just drag him right into bed. Which was really *creepy!* I mean if he thought that was going to get me excited he's even weirder than he looks.

"So then the climax is—you should excuse the expression—we get to the ladies' room and he wants to follow me in! He says it's part of normal security measures because we don't have clearance yet. And he does this whole number on me about overcoming my uptightness and how I shouldn't feel embarrassed about normal body functions

but just be spontaneous like dogs and cats and hyenas. So I said if it's so normal and ordinary why does he have to watch it, and he says because there's no more beautiful sight in nature, and had I ever seen a giraffe lifting its leg? Which I can't even imagine one doing without falling down and I told him so. And I said anyway I wasn't planning on lifting my leg, especially for him, and that I was incapable of going to the bathroom with a man in the room and we were wasting a lot of time and my father was going to get restless. And that seemed to have some effect because he got out. But he was kind of upset because he like *lectured* me all the way back, and you know what else he did, you won't believe this! He bit my hat! On the way back. He just leaned over and bit my hat! What a weirdo!"

But I was immensely grateful because while she was going through all that Taylor got the Wyatt Earp file out of the safe and into Bran's attaché case, and we were ready to leave.

But before they'd returned—before we'd even had a chance to take a breath—another crisis was developing. When Bran snapped the attaché case shut I noticed he was fumbling quite a bit, and his face was alarmingly flushed.

"Hurrah for us!" he said, much too loudly. "We've done it!"

"Not yet we haven't," I reminded him.

"Nonsense! From here in—a piece of cake!" He marched to the window and looked out over the darkening landscape. "You know, this is a charming spot. A charming spot! I wish I actually *did* work here—"

"Shhh!" I came as close to shouting as one can while going "shhh." I could hear footsteps in the corridor. "They're coming back!"

"All right, all right!" He lowered his voice. "A *charming* spot!" he muttered defiantly. "Who built it?"

"The Church, most likely," Taylor said.

Bran frowned. "Oh, too bad! I like to think of some rich eccentric trying to recapture the romance of days gone by!" He began to recite, waving his arms about—still holding the attaché case:

In Xanadu did Kubla Khan
A stately pleasure dome decree . . .

At this point Polly and Nagen entered. Bran wheeled around and continued without losing a beat, wagging his finger playfully at them.

. . . Mais ce projet il a oublié
Parce qu'il faut qu'il fait pipi!

He beamed at us triumphantly, while Nagen's eyes grew as large as it's possible for two BB pellets to grow.

I was petrified. It wasn't Bran's fractured French or even his inappropriateness that unnerved me as much as the telltale signs of Elena Dashowsky's accent oozing into his speech.

"You found the brandy," Nagen said dryly.

"Yes! Excellent! Excellent cognac!" Bran said.

"Dr. Pelleteur offered us some," I explained.

But Nagen had found something new for his paranoia to chew on: "Where are you from, Dr. Patito? I notice you have a little accent."

That brought Bran back to earth a bit and from then on he was more subdued. Unfortunately he couldn't seem to control the accent, which acted on Nagen like a colony of ants trapped inside his shirt.

"My mother was C*rrr*oation," Bran said resourcefully—and then spoiled it all by adding, "A beautiful woman, my Matushka—she used to sing me to sleep with Cossack love songs." He started to hum one dreamily. Polly snuck up and pinched him until he left off.

There was a ghastly pause. Nagen looked skeptical.

"I didn't know they had Cossacks in Yugoslavia."

"There are Cossacks everywhere!" Bran said with a contemptuous gesture. "Everywhere!" he scowled. "The bloodsuckers!"

I felt it was time to intervene. "You know, darling, we *really* should go." I fixed him with a meaningful wifely stare. "Dr. Schaufenster said we shouldn't wait—that if he wasn't here by nine we should go directly to his house." This was part of the script. "We don't want to delay him."

"You are *rrr*ight," he said, slapping his thigh. I seemed to have switched him back on the track. "He said we could come by for a small drink. We must hurry!" He was all business now, waving the

"children" onto their feet and bustling them out the office door.

But it was too late. Nagen was in a state of acute agitation. He stopped short in the doorway, forcing us to slide awkwardly around him.

"Drink?"

"Yes. Drink."

"His wife doesn't allow liquor in his house," he pounced, sneering. "She's a fanatical teetotaler."

Bran was breezy. "I suppose he just meant something cool." We were edging toward the stairs, but Nagen was hot on the scent.

"How long have you known Dr. Schaufenster?"

Bran was beginning to perspire. At least he was sobering up a little. "I would say, four years—maybe more."

"I don't think he ever mentioned you."

"We are not close friends. We are associates only. It is all from work."

Nagen's eyes narrowed so much I wondered how he could see to walk. "Where did you meet him?"

At that moment a very bizarre thing happened. A small dwarf, almost a midget, dressed in a three-piece seersucker suit and carrying a briefcase, which occasionally bounced on the floor, hurried past us down the stairs, nodding briefly as he went. Nagen stared.

"Is he with you?"

"No."

"A lot of new faces tonight." He ground his teeth as he said it. "Where were we?"

"I . . . don't recall."

We continued down the first-floor corridor. If we could just make it to the door.

"Oh, yes. I was asking about Schaufenster. Where you met him."

"Yes. . . . I think it was that conference in St. Louis."

"What conference in—?"

He stopped short. A small seal was humping down the corridor, snuffling and barking.

"What was that?" he said nervously.

I squeezed Bran's arm and said quickly, "What was *what?*"

"The seal, Mommy!" It was Athene's first real entertainment of the night, and she wasn't about to let me consign it to oblivion.

"That's what *I* thought it was," Nagen said with visible relief.

"What's a seal doing here?" I asked innocently. "Part of your research?"

"No. I don't know. I'm going to have to talk to Frank. You were saying? Something about St. Louis?"

"Of course, I could be wrong," Bran said maganimously. "All those conferences . . . they blend together, don't they!"

"Not for me they don't."

"Perhaps it could have been the Chicago one."

"I don't remember any conference in—"

This time it was two twin teenage girls in drum majorette costumes, twirling batons in perfect unison. Nagen was sweating, and I don't mind admitting that the rest of us were a little weirded-out, too, except Athene, for whom the evening was definitely picking up.

". . . any conference in Chicago!" Nagen resumed stubbornly. The lobby was coming into view.

"Chicago. Chicago. Wasn't the International there four years ago?"

"The what?"

An enormous flock of pigeons suddenly appeared on the floor and took off in a great rush, flying around crazily and making us all duck. Athene screamed and Nagen started to yell:

"Frank! Frank!"

No sooner called than he appeared. But the pigeons immediately vanished.

"Glad I caught you in time!" Frank smiled. "You're in luck. I just got a call from the gate. Dr. Schaufenster's on his way. He'll be here any minute."

I looked at Taylor. He was white. Bran looked at us for a cue. Nobody knew what to do. Bran was carrying the file. We were caught.

I tried in vain to think of an explanation that would save us. Athene was tired and likely to blurt something out at any time. Taylor looked stunned and hopeless. Polly was plainly terrified, probably imagining a life spent singing in prison talent shows. Bran was biting his lip. He'd certainly been a creative bullshitter so far, but what could he say to Schaufenster? How could he take back his claim that he knew him?

We all stood staring at the door, hypnotized. A shadow finally appeared in the glass. Frank hurried over and opened it.

"Evening, Dr. Schaufenster."

"Hello, Frank. Hello, Chester, Hello, folks. Sorry I'm so late. Everything always happens at once, doesn't it!"

Everybody shook hands all around, as if everything was perfectly normal. Only Taylor and I seemed to find anything peculiar about shaking hands with Louise Falling Bear, dressed in her usual baggy jeans, with the usual wad of gum in her cheek, and Barghest trotting with his usual cheerful flatulence by her side.

Olly-Olly-in-Free

I GUESS I must be tuned into Louise in some weird way, because I wasn't as surprised to see her as Grace was. When the seal and the drum majorettes went down the hall it was like picking up the familiar scent of somebody's perfume or hearing their voice in the distance. Maybe somebody like Sneath could have had the power to make all those things seem to happen, but those particular illusions had Louise's stamp on them.

Not that I wasn't surprised to have everyone greet her as Dr. Schaufenster. I can't even describe what a bizarre sensation it gave me to see the contrast between the way she looked and the way Nagen and Frank were acting toward her. But I guess that happens pretty often in everyday life, too, especially with celebrities.

"Glad to see you all had a chance to meet," she said diplomatically. "Sorry I forgot to brief you, Chester, but things've just been too

hectic with this Russian flap. Hope you'll spend lots of time together while I'm away."

Nagen scowled sullenly, not about to be mollified by a few glib apologies.

"I can't very well carry on here if you don't let me know what's happening," he snarled.

"Right, Chester, right! You're dead right! It was real thoughtless!"

Barghest gave a couple of impatient barks, but Nagen just jumped a little and looked around for the source—mostly in various corners of the ceiling.

"But I got every confidence you can handle it!" Louise went on. "Any situation that comes up!"

"Do you hear anything?" Nagen muttered uneasily.

We all shook our heads.

"Sounded like that seal," he said, twitching.

"You need a vacation, Chester!" Louise said heartily, slapping him on the back. "But I've got to get going, folks, so why don't you come along back to the house?"

She said good-bye and ushered us quickly out the door. The last thing we saw was Pelleteur sidling up to the rapidly crumbling Nagen, obviously sensing a soul in need of his services.

"Get in your car and follow me," Louise said to Bran when we were outside. She led us to the gate—where the man waved us through with a little bow—and then, by a roundabout route, into Cambridge, where we found a copying service that was open at night. There Louise managed one more illusion: making a top-secret government document look like a graduate student's research paper. We made six hundred copies, while Grace typed a short letter "To Whom It May Concern," linking the file to the nuclear accident and demonstrating the need for better communication and more stringent arms control. We planned to send the letter and the file to every senator and congressman in Washington, the editors of a bunch of major newspapers (even though they wouldn't dare print it), and some of the more prestigious antinuclear organizations, made up largely of nuclear scientists.

When we were back at the house and Grace had put Athen

bed, Bran made us all cold drinks and we sat down to relax. Louise looked at us and shook her head.

"What are you gonna do when they miss the file? They'll come after you."

"We'll leave," I said.

"Such children!" She smiled. "Tomorrow I'll put it back. You won't have to worry. And they won't recognize you from any description those folks'll put out." She chuckled. "But you sure didn't take much trouble to cover your tracks!"

"We're just amateurs, Louise," Grace said acidly, "and we don't have Sneath's organization behind us."

"You do pretty well for amateurs. You got past Delbert's muscle, and Taylor got through his jars."

"Why did you pull me back out of Sneath's office?" I asked.

"You made him nervous. If he'd seen you he might've scratched the whole mission."

"Do you know why the bombs didn't go off?" Grace asked, a little belligerently.

"Sure. They didn't go off 'cause we dismantled 'em."

"Who's 'we'? Makluts?"

"Makluts. Baba Yagas."

"I thought you all worked for Sneath."

"We don't work for anybody."

Grace stood up. "We've been through a lot, Louise. We almost died. Now cut the shit and *talk!*"

"Sit down, Captain, sit down." She paused. "It's hard for an old lady to break old habits." She took out a package of gum and started to peel the sticks. "We didn't survive all this time bein' blabbermouths." She put all five sticks in her mouth. "I didn't like puttin' you in danger. But I had to risk it. 'Course I didn't think you'd escape, so I thought you'd be a lot safer than it turned out."

"Why did you need us to go to Maine?"

"We had to sabotage those missiles. Just with 'medicine.' Took a lot of people a long time. No way old Sneath wasn't goin' to pick up on that if he was alert." She snickered. "But, you know, he was scared shitless of you, Taylor! You kept breakin' through his screens. I figured I could make use of that."

"So we were pawns," Grace said.

"Del wanted you up there so he could keep an eye on you. Keep you from gummin' up the works. I knew he'd want to get to know you, figure you out. While he was doin' that we were pullin' the stingers off those missiles." She chuckled maliciously.

"Why didn't he find out?" I asked. "I thought only alchemists could shield themselves."

"Del doesn't know as much as he thinks."

"What if we hadn't gone to Maine?" Grace asked suddenly.

"We'd've had a real face-off then. We'd've tried to stop the launch altogether. That's what we'd planned to do before. 'Course we'd've had to fight Sneath, too, 'cause it would've been out in the open." She paused, chewing thoughtfully. "Then we figured Del was right in a way. Better to have *some* kind of accident, get people excited."

"If you'd *told* us—"

"If I'd told you, he'd've found out. Del's no dummy."

"Then how did *you* fool him?" Grace persisted.

Louise chewed silently for a moment and then tucked her gum in her cheek. "See, long time ago I let Del see me when he thought I didn't want him to. People can be real stupid when they think they're controllin' you."

Grace tapped her foot. "So you . . . ?" she prompted.

"You want me to say somethin', don't you?"

"I want you to admit you were just as willing to sacrifice us as Sneath was."

Louise shrugged. "Maybe. I wasn't gonna mess up the whole game just to save your necks. I figured if you thought I was under Del's thumb you wouldn't be foolhardy and get into a lot of trouble." She laughed. "'Course you did anyway."

"One other thing," I said. "When I caught the spider and followed it to Sneath's house, did he just let me do that, the way you did with him? Was he just luring me there?"

"No. You just went right through all his defenses." She paused to look for a metal wastebasket and fire her gum into it. "You were the wild card in this game. There's always one, you know—you learn that. Some crazy surprise comes along, and if you don't know how to play it it'll gum up all your plans. You gotta let it go where it wants. You fight it, try to control it, it's the devil himself. Sneath

knows that, but when you caught him on the wall he got scared, tried to keep you in a jug. And that's why he lost."

"So how come you included me in all this?" Grace asked. "*I* don't have any psychic power!"

Louise laughed till she almost swallowed her gum. "Shit, Captain! You're the wildest card of all!"

And that's all Grace ever got out of her.

In Massachusetts they apparently believe that if too many stores are open on Sunday it will retard the Second Coming, so we had to wait until Monday morning to get envelopes and stamps and mail off the file. We mailed them from several different post offices in case any of them got discovered, so at least some of them would get through.

The mailing had quite an impact. People freaked out at the vulnerability of the whole system and the fact that the president and his advisers and various scientists of impeccable logic and rationality could have accepted such a cockamamy scheme in the first place. At the same time, antinuclear scientists were engaging in very graphic discussions of what would have happened to Boston if the missile hadn't been a dud, and this was finally beginning to sink in a little. "How soon would you have died?" became a favorite conversation topic, like "where were you when the blackout came?" There was even a trend toward people moving into the city in order to die quickly if it happened again.

Since both countries had developed automatic retaliatory systems that were extremely sensitive and would be operational before they could all be knocked out, they'd both reached the stage where an accidental firing of one of their own missiles was as dangerous to them as an accident by "the enemy." They began to realize that only an acceptance of their complete interdependence could prevent catastrophe for both of them.

So that's how we saved the world. At least for the time being. I have to admit it's not out of the woods yet, but at least we bought a few extra years, and we felt pretty good about it.

I don't know what happened to Sneath—whether he decided that his plan had worked out after all, even with our amendments, or whether he just decided to lay low and rebuild. Maybe he's already

got a new scheme in the works. Meanwhile he's out there somewhere, making policy for the United States and the USSR without their knowing it. It's kind of a scary thought, but I guess not much scarier than what you read in the paper every day.

There was a lot of paranoia at Steinkopf when the file became public. Everybody suspected everybody, but since Louise got the file back in the safe before anyone knew it was gone they didn't have much to go on. Schaufenster and Nagen had words about the alleged new colleague, of whom Schaufenster naturally denied all knowledge. Nagen's claim that Schaufenster had visited the lab—a claim backed up by three eyewitnesses—lost some of its force in the face of Schaufenster's claim, backed by up several *dozen* eyewitnesses, that at that very moment he was ramming into the back of a Mercedes at the entrance to the Callahan Tunnel—a mishap that tied up airport-bound traffic for two hours and required his hospitalization. Eventually a spy was found who was induced to confess to the crime, but the rift between Nagen and Schaufenster never healed.

Iris was fired after the file became public, and spent the rest of his short life playing the slots in various disguises. A few years later, while masquerading as a Milwaukee matron, he caught one of his high heels in a grating and pitched over a hotel balcony to his death.

Nobody in this entire story started his or her own business, I'm sorry to say.

A week after we mailed off the Earp file we packed up and got ready to go back to Las Lunas, taking Athene with us. Polly wanted to stay in Boston and Bran decided he'd stay with her as long as he could. But a few months later her hit album, *Heaven's Devils,* came out and she started to make it big. She and Bran relocated in Las Lunas so even though she's away a lot we get to see them pretty often. Whenever Polly sings and Bran's in the audience, she has him come up and they do a couple of what Grace calls their schmaltzy balalaika numbers. The technical quality's a little rough, but they have a lot of heart and the fans love it, except for a few of the guys who are kind of jealous.

The day before we left Belmont, Grace called Peter to let him know we were coming back. He announced triumphantly that he had finally finished his paper on social action and that it would

profoundly influence the course of history. He said he'd be glad to see us but that he was a little disappointed that we'd spent our summer so frivolously in times like these.

Grace and I are still together and Athene calls me "Dad" sometimes. Grace changed her name to Castlewoman, but she says it's nothing personal.

Nobody's bothered us at all. Sneath said we'd be safe as long as we never talked, and we never have—until now. Of course we've changed the names and all so no one can be traced, and if anyone figures it out I hope they'll keep it to themselves, because it might be all that's keeping us alive.

(continued from front flap)

and the sinister Delbert Sneath, who manages to track the group from Denver to Cambridge and eventually to a remote island off the Maine coast where Taylor and Grace come under the thumb of a madman.

Philip Slater proves to have a marvelous, light touch with fiction, and exposes a host of absurdities in American life: California life-styles, academic pretension, government bureaucracies, the mores of middle-class American barbecues, and the masochistic pace of Manhattanites, among many other aspects of American life in the '80s. The novel is both funny and suspenseful—usually both at the same time. Even with the nuclear clock ticking, Taylor and Grace never lose their delight in life's absurdities as they pursue their exciting, often misguided efforts to fulfill their mission.

PHILIP SLATER left a distinguished academic career (Harvard University, and Brandeis, where he taught sociology for ten years) in 1971 to devote his time to writing. Mr. Slater's previous books include *The Glory of Hera, Wealth Addiction,* and the best-selling *The Pursuit of Loneliness.*

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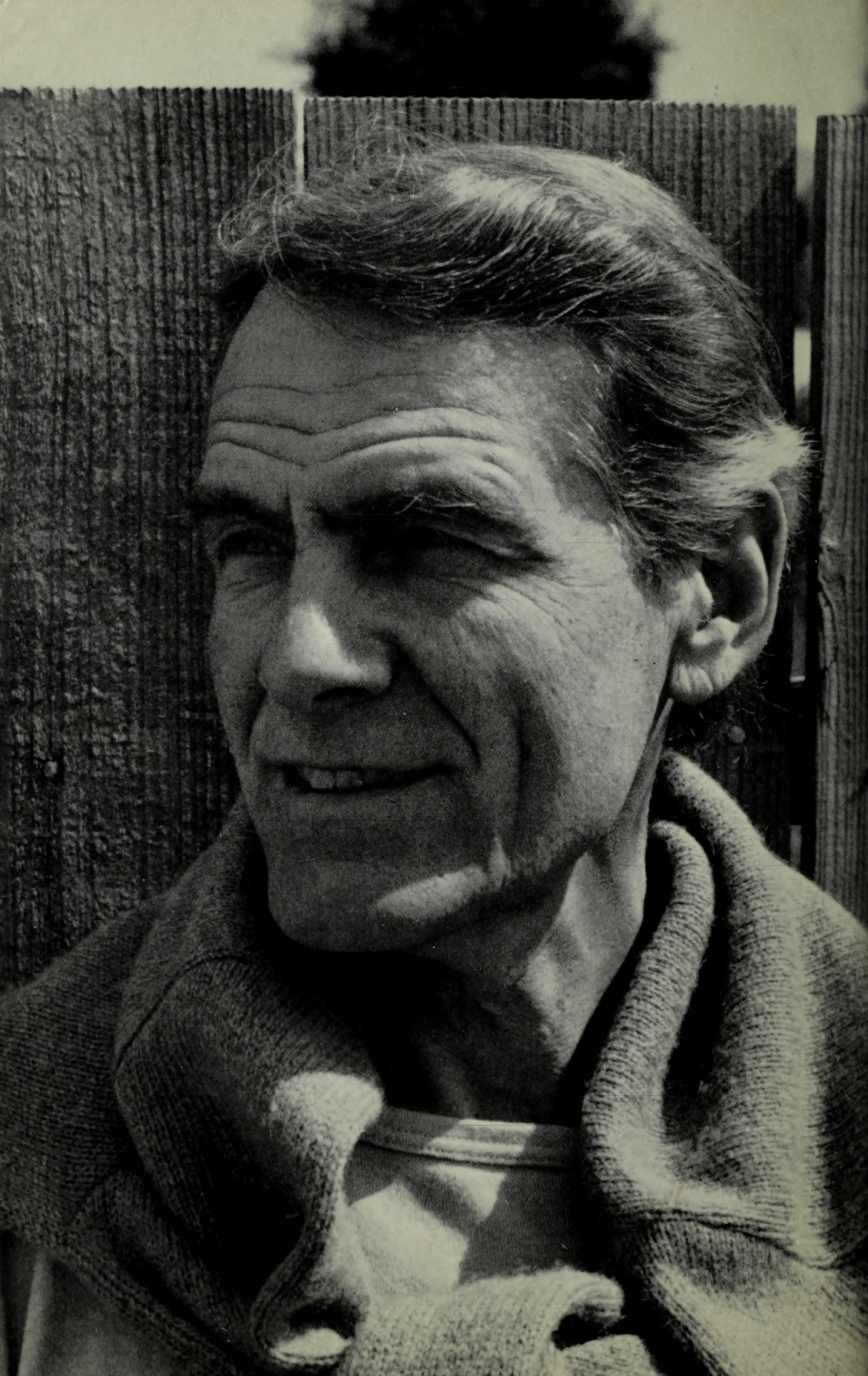
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